Consumer Resistance in a World of Advertising Clutter: The Case of *Adbusters*

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ABSTRACT

The pervasive influence of advertising and consumer culture is examined in relation to a postmodern condition marked by increased speed, fragmentation, and the decentering of the subject. This condition often prompts the consumer to develop ad-avoidance strategies that protect his/her psychic space by filtering out excess advertising clutter (which also colonizes the public and discursive space of consumer culture). The struggle for these cultural spaces resembles a war of position between the ideology of consumerism and its opponents, who attempt to cultivate alternative worldviews toward consumerism. Although some perspectives see consumption as a means for self-expression and the fashioning of multiple identities, this position valorizes consumption practices irrespective of their environmental and social impact. An evaluation of the antiadvertising magazine *Adbusters* illustrates the obstacles inherent in launching challenges to consumerism, and the difficulty of resisting consumerism given advertising's control over cultural spaces. Marketers have converted resistance efforts from some of consumption's most ardent critics into market segments by targeting certain goods and services toward them. © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

The cultural landscape of contemporary life has witnessed a marked increase in advertising clutter (Goldman & Papson, 1994, 1996;

McAlister, 1996). The average American consumer was exposed to an estimated 3600 selling messages per day in 1996, compared to 1500 in 1984 (Jhally, 1998). This daily regimen of advertising messages may exceed the information-processing abilities of most consumers, requiring them to filter out excess visual and aural marketing stimuli (much of which consists of messages targeted at different demographic and psychographic groups). Although the range of consumer goods and services that advertisers promote offers consumers a multitude of modern conveniences and means for self-expression and empowerment, exposure to too many selling messages can alert cognitive defenses and foster resentment. Consequently, in order to avoid being oversaturated by advertising messages, today's postmodern consumer is often forced to employ "ad avoidance" strategies (Speck & Elliott, 1997) that can help to maintain some measure of sovereignty over his/her psychic space.

Extending to envelop public space (e.g., sites of consumption) and discursive space (e.g., mass media and fora for social and political debate), advertising and consumer culture have become inexorable parts of everyday life. Collectively, all of these spaces can be considered cultural spaces wherein advertising is the main propagandist for the pervasive logic of consumerism. This cultural logic—and the unexamined assumptions upon which it rests—typifies Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony, or the myriad processes through which the *forma mentis* (or worldview) of a social group or class is disseminated to procure the consent of governed subjects. The cultural, intellectual, and political imperatives of a hegemonic order are said to encompass the "whole area of lived experience" (Williams, 1977, p. 23) to play a pivotal, multifaceted role in shaping public consciousness.

For Habermas (1962/1989), the public sphere is a hypothetical nongovernmental arena where private citizens can meet to engage in rational discourse designed to reach a consensus over issues of mutual importance, thus empowering citizens through active political participation. The democratic ideal of this model rests on participants being able to bracket their respective social and economic differences in order to deliberate as peers with equal "dialogue chances," or "a symmetrical distribution of chances to select and employ speech acts" (McCarthy, 1978, p. 306). "Distorted communication" is said to take place when the information exchange between marketers and consumers does not exhibit "general symmetry" because marketers have greater information about—and control over—the communication process[1] (Ozanne & Murray, 1995, p. 520). Because advertising revenue gives the vast majority of television, radio, and print media the license to do business, any publication or program that is critical of advertising or consumerism places itself at an enormous competitive disadvantage (Herman & Chomsky,

[1]McAlister (1996, p. 63–92) cites the rise of "place-based advertising" as evidence of marketers' desire to control the advertising communication process.

1988, pp. 14–18). Essentially, advertising messages legitimate consumerism by controlling a mass-media industry that is virtually devoid of space for the articulation of dissenting views.

As evidenced by the shift toward service-oriented, consumer-based economies, the commercialization of public life has eroded the public-discursive spaces in which rational debate could conceivably occur. The 20th-century transition from a "culture-debating" to a "culture-consuming" public is evidenced by the demise of substantive, literary discourse and the rise of the "pseudopublic" world of privatized consumption (Habermas, 1962/1989). To wit, Langmann (1992, p. 40) locates the shopping mall in a "pseudo-democratic twilight zone between reality and a commercially produced fantasy world . . . ." The modern public sphere thus serves as a "platform for advertising" (Habermas, 1962/1989) in which the rights and responsibilities of citizens have been reduced to their rights as members of consuming publics. In terminology subsequently developed by Habermas (1984), the increased "colonization" of airwaves (discursive space), physical landscapes (public space), and lived experience (psychic space) by marketers permeates the fabric of our cultural "lifeworld" and hinders the exchange of rational discourse. By colonizing public, discursive, and psychic spaces, advertising becomes a central part of our commonly held cultural repertoire, one whose hegemonic control over these spaces poses enormous obstacles for those who wish to reclaim them.

THE POSTMODERN CONSUMER

A useful concept for understanding the effects of advertising saturation on consumer culture is the notion of the fragmented and wary postmodern consumer. This notion follows from critiques launched by postmodern social theorists against the totalizing discourse of modernity and the reasoned Enlightenment philosophy upon which its knowledge claims and "regimes of truth" are said to rest (cf. Foucault, 1977/1984, 1977/1995). Postmodernism derives its moniker from what Lyotard (1984) dubbed the "postmodern condition" of contemporary society. This atomizing, fragmentary condition is seen as one in which modernity's inability to truly liberate individual subjects has undermined faith in progressive, goal-oriented modernist narratives of unity and progress, thereby exacerbating the decline of society (Lyotard, 1984; cf. Venkatesh, 1992, p. 201). The main identifiable themes of the postmodern critique are[2]

[2]Although the themes of the postmodern condition presented here borrow from the work of Firat and Venkatesh (1995), they have been rearranged into a sequence that better lends itself to the analysis at hand. The description of the themes enumerated herein summarizes the most relevant features of Firat and Venkatesh's more exhaustive list. Additionally, the order in which they are presented does not represent any specific chain of causality.

1. The quickened pace of postmodern life engenders a condition of "hyperreality" in which "the real becomes not only that which can be reproduced, but that which is already reproduced: the hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1976/1988, pp. 145–146). This postmodern crisis of representation constitutes a "blurring of the distinction between real and nonreal" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, p. 252) whereby reality is not merely given but constructed through "replication" (Venkatesh, 1992, p. 202) and/or "simulation"[3] (Baudrillard, 1981/1988, p. 170). In postmodern advertisements, marketers simulate "the creation of *more* real than real" (Firat & Venkatesh, p. 252, italics in original), casting the postmodern consumer's perception of reality adrift in an endless sea of multireferential symbols and captivating spectacles designed to cut through the clutter of competing selling messages.

2. In opposition to the notion of a unified, knowing Cartesian subject, the postmodern consumer is a "decentered subject" whose authentic self is said to be irrevocably splintered and displaced by a "made-up self" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, p. 252; McCarthy, 1987; Venkatesh, 1992, p. 199). In response to the stultifying demands of maintaining selfhood in contemporary society, the postmodern consumer "embraces the confusion between the subject and the object" and is liberated from having or seeking a centered, integrated self (Firat & Venkatesh, p. 254). Postmodern consumption offers the decentered subject a wide array of products and services to enhance the "presentation of self" (Goffman, 1959), often in order to seek recognition and empowerment in everyday life (cf. de Certeau, 1984; Langmann, 1992).

3. Relatedly, the postmodern condition is marked by "fragmentation" in which the divided self is absolved of "seeking or conforming to one sense or experience of being" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, p. 254). Although the fragmentation of postmodern society has wrought social dislocation, disharmony, and atomization, the fragmentation of the individual is seen by some as an empowering site of resistance (Hearn & Roseneil, 1999). Having been emancipated from the constraints of maintaining a rigidly proscribed, normative social identity, the postmodern consumer is able to cultivate multiple, situation-specific self-images by engaging in a variety of disjointed consumption experiences (Firat, 1992, p. 204; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, p. 255). Under postmodernity, "marketing . . . fragments consumption signs and environments and re-

[3]This is Baudrillard's (1981/1988, p. 170) "simulacrum," which he describes as follows: "Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum. These would be the successive phases of the image: 1. It is the reflection of a basic reality. 2. It masks and perverts a basic reality. 3. It masks the *absence* of reality. 4. It bears no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (italics in original).

configures them through style and fashion" (Firat & Venkatesh, p. 252). This "aestheticization of everyday life" (Featherstone, 1991) situates the consumer in potentially liberatory spaces in order to pursue emotive, sensual, and other experiential pleasures (Firat & Venkatesh, p. 253; Fiske 1989/2000). As Gabriel and Lang (1995) point out, the many "faces of the consumer" correspond to certain social roles in which the consumer is empowered; such as "chooser," "communicator," "identity-seeker," "hedonist," "rebel," "activist," and even "citizen." Consequently, the terrain of hegemony is said to shift to one in which postmodern consumption practices enable the fashioning of multiple identities in opposition to dominant meanings.

4. The postmodern consumer redefines the roles of producer and consumer by actively producing his/her own "symbols and signs of consumption" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, p. 252) and deriving unintended meanings from advertising messages (Schroder, 1997). Inverting the Cartesian subject/object dichotomy, marketing objectifies the consumer and products "become active agents" (Firat & Venkatesh, p. 252).

5. The postmodern condition embraces a "juxtaposition of opposites" in which "fragmentation, rather than unification, is the basis of consumption" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, p. 252). Postmodern consumption thematizes social differences and paradoxes in order "to allow them to exist freely" (Firat & Venkatesh, p. 252). Consumer culture becomes a way to differentiate oneself by constructing unique identities without fear of reproach from the binding influence of social bonds and moral obligations.

PSYCHIC SPACE IN AN AGE OF ADVERTISING CLUTTER

Although consumer markets can offer numerous advantages to the many faces of the postmodern consumer, limits inevitably arise as to the amount and types of liberation that can be realized through consumption. Finite disposable incomes and dwindling leisure time constrain our ability to consume, and cognitive limitations at a given time dictate that it is impossible to pay attention to each and every selling message (Jacoby, 1984; Malhorta, 1982). The Socratic adage that says "our awareness is selective" aptly describes the limited amount of psychic space each consumer reserves for advertising messages. Information saturation (and advertising clutter in particular) requires the postmodern consumer to develop coping mechanisms and ad avoidance strategies (cf. Speck & Elliott, 1997) in order to guard against being overwhelmed. Again, when confronted with too many ad messages, the consumer must filter out the excess stimuli, paying attention only to those messages that pass through his or her internal screening criteria.

Cumulative exposure to advertising clutter can also prompt skeptical consumers to feel exploited (Mendoza, 1999) and provoke "viewer resentment and hostility" (Goldman & Papson, 1994, p. 24). A rough composite emerges of a wary, jaded, and recalcitrant postmodern consumer who has been variously described as unmanageable (Gabriel & Lang, 1995), vigilant (Dickenson, 1993) and reflexively defiant (Ozanne & Murray, 1995).

Marketing professionals are keenly aware of the obstacles posed by both information-processing limitations and viewer opposition. As McAlister (1996, p. 76) observes: "reaching desirable groups—especially those groups with disposable income and the willingness to dispose of it—is problematic for advertisers." The multiplicity of advertising messages to which each consumer is exposed dictates that advertisers place a lofty premium on the much-coveted psychic space of their intended message recipients. Moreover, marketers increasingly find themselves trying to reach target audiences who have an arsenal of cognitive, behavioral, and mechanical strategies for ad avoidance at their disposal (Speck & Elliott, 1997, p. 61).

Because many of these ad avoidance strategies lend themselves particularly well to more technologically advanced media, ad avoidance is much higher for television viewers than for readers of print media[4] (Speck & Elliott, 1997). In response to rising viewer opposition, the erosion of free time, and competition from more personalized entertainment options such as cable, satellite dishes, video rentals, and the internet, television advertisers have resorted to more captivating and deceptive "anti-clutter, anti-zapping strategies," including the use of "camouflaged ads" and "the creation of all-advertising television channels" (McAlister, 1996, p. 95). Relatedly, Goldman and Papson (1994) note that the quickened pace of television ads—which tries to shock jaded viewers into paying attention—is designed to "stand out and break through the advertising clutter" (p. 36). This speed-up of advertising messages compels the viewer to pay attention to the message by employing imagery that demands a more visceral response than the traditional "narrative and rational response" (Jhally, 1990, p. 517).

Although anticlutter advertising strategies have emerged in response to both technological developments and consumer responses to advertising saturation, other innovations have been prompted by the increasing predictability of antiquated advertising conventions that could no longer pass through the filters of seasoned postmodern consumers[5] (Goldman & Papson, 1994, pp. 24–25; 1996/2000, p. 85). After 40 years

[4]For example, Moriarty and Everett (1994) found that commercial breaks increased muting by 700% ignoring behaviors by 400%, leaving by 100%, and talking by 40% (cf. Speck & Elliott, 1997, p. 62).

[5]According to McAlister (1996, p. 123) "advertisers believe that the persuasive impact of a commercial is decreased when people *know* it is a commercial. They also believe that people tend to zap the commercial when they know it is a commercial" (italics in original).

of catchy yet repetitious jingles, straightforward testimonials, and worn-out sales pitches, several renegade advertising agencies went against the grain in the late 1980s in order to "take advantage of viewer antipathy toward advertising by turning criticisms into positioning concepts" (Goldman & Papson, 1994, p. 25).

These concepts include two distinct sets of strategies for appropriating the psychic space of the postmodern consumer—deception and hyperrealism. The former attempts to create a seamless flow between the advertisement and the sponsored programming content itself—such as camouflaged ads and product placements found in movies and television (McAlister, 1996, pp. 104–130)—and the latter employs "exaggerated realist conventions" to recreate scenarios from everyday life (Goldman & Papson, 1994, pp. 26–27). Hyperrealism enables advertisers to reflexively confront the criticisms of seasoned viewers and thereby demonstrate that they "recognize them as savvy consumers" accustomed to spotting routinized advertising claims (Goldman & Papson, p. 25). A distinct variant of hyperrealism that has become increasingly prevalent in advertising is self-referential parody, in which sponsors' selling messages refer back to other advertisements, often their own. Parodic advertising enlists the active participation of audience members, requiring the viewer to call upon his or her own familiarity with contemporary cultural texts in order to appropriately respond to the ad and deduce its meaning (Goldman & Papson, p. 37; Harries, 1997, pp. 300–301). Such ads frequently disparage competing ad messages in an effort to convert viewer disaffection into a favorable impression of the sponsored product. These and other innovations underscore the urgency of a highly competitive advertising environment that prompts marketers to employ increasingly sophisticated strategies in order to secure the limited psychic space of the postmodern consumer.

CONSUMERISM AS HEGEMONY

The psychological and cultural manifestations of postmodern advertising resonate with Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which goes beyond Marxian notions of ideological control to envelope the "whole lived social process" through which certain beliefs and worldviews emerge as dominant[6] (Williams, 1977, pp. 108–110). As terrain, hegemony refers to spaces in which the "war of position" between competing worldviews takes place. This ideological terrain is "civil society," or the realm of public interaction where the "consent" of citizens is gained by disseminating worldviews that enable certain strata to emerge as dominant

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[6]Williams describes hegemony as "a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world" (1977, p. 110).

(Buttigieg, 1995, pp. 4, 20). Consent complements coercive force to convert the worldview of elite interests into what is perceived to be the "common good" (Buttigieg, p. 27, 30). As a result, the hegemonic order is strengthened[7] (Langmann, 2000, p. 6).

Although he did not explicitly theorize consumption *per se,* and was not a psychologist by trade, Gramsci (1971, 1995) was acutely aware of the role played by intellectual and cultural life in shaping perception. As an Italian parliament member, party organizer and leader, labor activist, journalist, and cultural critic who was imprisoned by Mussolini in 1926 for opposing the emerging fascist regime, Gramsci saw firsthand how control over the production and dissemination of ideas—in intellectual, cultural, and political spheres—could be used to defuse opposition and strengthen the power base of a ruling hegemony.

In *Manufacturing Consent,* Herman and Chomsky (1988, p. 303) contend that the consent of the governed in civil society is engineered naturally by presenting "a tolerably realistic portrayal of the world." Consent is procured at the level of common sense, which Gramsci (1971) describes as a "'superstitious' and acritical" domain in which "the 'realistic', materialistic elements . . . are predominant" (p. 420). Hall (1979, pp. 325–326) describes commonsense reasoning as follows:

> You cannot learn, through common sense, *how things are*: you can only discover *where they fit* into the existing scheme of things. In this way, its very taken-for-grantedness is what establishes it as a medium in which its own premises and presuppositions are being rendered *invisible* by its apparent transparency (italics in original).

Dominant groups' delineation of the bounds of common sense universalizes their interests as natural, taken-for-granted phenomena whose underlying assumptions remain unquestioned, thus inflecting the culture of everyday life with political and psychological consequences.

Culture, Consumerism, and the Organic Intellectual

The hegemonic cultural logic of consumerism systematically permeates public, discursive, and psychic spaces, dictating that our lived experiences are increasingly shaped and monitored by marketers. Advertising represents an intertwining of culture and cognition that "continuously appropriates meanings . . . recontextualizing those meanings to fit

[7]In elucidating the hegemonic nature of consumerism, Langmann (2000, p. 6) asserts that "hegemony fosters 'spontaneous assent' to hierarchical social arrangements and inegalitarian privilege by fostering identities and lifestyles disposed to accepting the dominant belief systems and colonizing desire to impel the routines of everyday life that lead to the reproduction of the social order."

commodities or corporations" (Goldman & Papson, 1996/2000, p. 87). Advertisers naturalize consumerism by converting contemporary culture "into a giant mine for intertextual references" (Goldman & Papson, 1994, p. 37), with the success of a particular ad depending largely on an advertiser's ability to synthesize references that resonate with the extended cultural repertoire of a particular target market[8] (Goldman & Papson, 1996/2000, p. 88).

On the cognitive front, the appropriation of psychic space by marketers means that an individual's sense of self increasingly reflects the values, assumptions, and beliefs of consumer culture. However, the idealized depictions of beautiful and happy consumers offered by advertisements are frequently incommensurable with the postmodern consumer's own self-image. A deeply rooted sense of inadequacy may result when the "juxtaposition of opposites" between advertised perfection and lived reality leaves the consumer feeling too fat, too ugly, too poor, too old, or the wrong color.

These incongruities reveal an ignoble underside to the fragmented cultural landscape of postmodern consumption, which is said to represent a "shifting stage of hegemony" that idealizes "the appearance of individuals playfully adapting corporate signs to their own needs" (Goldman & Papson, 1994, p. 25). Although postmodern consumption may offer consumers endless ways to assert their identities in resistance to dominant meanings and power structures, by their mere participation consumers are nonetheless implicated within the market system. It is likely that a wholesale exit from the consumer marketplace (Herrmann, 1993) is required to avoid the cognitive dissonance that stems from not being able to conform to advertised images of perfection.[9] Besieged by the pervasiveness of consumerism, consumers may occasionally attempt to reassert control over cultural spaces. To reclaim them, one must develop critically informed media literacy skills that heighten awareness to the "commodification of meaning that underlies virtually all ideology in commercial programming" (Lembo & Tucker, 1990, p. 106) and provide cognitive defenses against the behavioral manipulation techniques that advertising routinely employs.

For Gramsci, the task of cultivating such a mindset rests with organic

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[8]According to Leiss, Kline, and Jhally (1986): Advertising is itself a "multiplexing" form that absorbs and fuses a variety of symbolic practices and discourses. The substance and images woven into advertising messages are appropriated and distilled from an unbounded range of cultural references . . . Through advertising, goods are knitted into the fabric of social life and cultural significance. The borrowed references are fused with products and *returned to cultural discourse.* (p. 146, italics added)

[9]As Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 258) observe, order to more fully realize the liberatory potential of the consumer, the consumer must be located outside the market: "It is therefore necessary to identify a social space beyond the reach of the market by positioning the consumer in the 'lifeworld' and outside the market system."

intellectuals[10] who enable a particular social class or group to articulate its own interests by generating an alternative worldview in opposition to the dominant hegemony (Buttigieg, 1995, p. 14). If the communities and clusters of consumers that marketers target can be said to constitute social groups, then the organic intellectual's task is to help them develop the ability to decipher message claims, become aware of the cultural effects of advertising, and resist the hegemonic logic of consumerism. This intellectual must bridge the chasm between academic and lay discourses to link theoretical critiques of consumerism with an everyday practice of resistance. Such a movement may adopt a grass-roots strategy around which traditional or vernacular cultures can organize themselves against encroaching globalization. By expanding discursive space, the organic intellectual fosters the cultural preparation necessary for developing a worldview that opposes dominant mindsets and can potentially transform the hegemonic terrain of civil society.[11]

ADBUSTERS' CULTIVATION OF CONSUMER RESISTANCE

The Canadian magazine *Adbusters* expands discursive space by providing a forum for critical views on consumerism and advertising. In lieu of the paid advertisements common to mainstream magazines, *Adbusters* intersperses its written and graphic content with parodic "anti-ads" akin to "social marketing" on behalf of public-service and nonprofit organizations (Kotler & Andreason, 1991; Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). The articles in *Adbusters* feature commentaries from both leading intellectuals and staff writers that are critical of how advertising, big business, and unbridled consumerism affect natural, political, social, and mental environments. However, *Adbusters* also includes viewpoints that are quite critical of professionalized academia and the role it plays in influencing public policy ("Profession Watch," 2001). By providing an antidogmatic forum that links academic and lay or public intellectuals to cultivate an anticonsumerist mindset among its readership, the magazine can potentially perform functions similar to the Gramscian organic

[10]The organic intellectual gives purpose, meaning, and coherence to the articulation of specific class and group interests: "Every social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields. The capitalist entrepreneur creates alongside himself the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizers of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc." (Gramsci, 1971, p. 5).

[11]"Any cultural movement" designed to "replace common sense and old conceptions of the world in general" must originate from within the masses so as to "work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace, in other words, to give a personality to the amorphous mass element. This means working to produce *elites* of intellectuals of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 340, italics in original).

intellectual. *Adbusters* is produced by the Vancouver-based Media Foundation, who describe themselves as:

> . . . a loose global network of artists, writers, environmentalists, ecological economists, media-literacy teachers, reborn Lefties, ecofeminists, downshifters, high school shit-disturbers, campus rabble-rousers, incorrigibles, malcontents and green entrepreneurs. We are idealists, anarchists, guerrilla tacticians, pranksters, neo-Luddites, poets, philosophers and punks. We see ourselves as one of the most significant social movements of the next 20 years. Our aim is to topple existing power structures and forge a major rethinking of the way we will live in the 21st century. We believe culture jamming . . . will alter the way we live and think. It will change the way we interact with the mass media and the way in which meaning is produced in our society ("Cultural Revolution," 2001).

Situationism: The Society of the Spectacle

As an influential precursor to later critiques of consumer culture, the Situationists are a primary source of theoretical and practical inspiration for *Adbusters.* Formed amid the radicalized intellectual and social climate of 1960s France, the group dramatized the pervasive sociocultural effects of what co-founder Guy Debord (1967/1994) called "the spectacle." In *The Society of the Spectacle,* Debord (1967/1994) infused Marxian notions of commodity fetishism with Dadaist and surrealist aesthetic critiques to theorize a contemporary mass society entranced by spectacular imagery and atomized through its indulgence in modern, privatized bourgeois comforts. For the Situationists, the "commodity form" of spectacular society "unleashes a *limitless artificiality*" that cumulatively blurs reality and falsifies genuinely human experiences (Debord, p. 45, italics in original). Capitalism enchants mass society with the spectacle and other "disinformation" to procure mass consent and preserve the ruling order, thereby presenting it as the only conceivable form of organization for modern society (Plant, 1992, p. 22).

Situationism was an intellectual precursor to postmodernism (Plant, 1992, p. 5, 150). Unlike much postmodernism, it was a decidedly revolutionary program concerned with the erasure of social contradiction and inequality.[12] Going beyond mere critique, the Situationists developed a comprehensive strategy for transforming mass consciousness and undermining existing power structures (Plant, pp. 7–37). As they were wary of how difference and rebellion are readily converted by marketers into the commodity form, the Situationists embraced social con-

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[12]Debord maintained that these social contradictions are obscured by the spectacle: "What spectacular antagonisms conceal is the *unity of poverty.* Differing forms of a single alienation contend in the masquerade of total freedom of choice by virtue of the fact that they are all founded on real repressed contradictions" (1967/1994, p. 41, italics in original).

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tradictions and dissent as weapons to be turned against society (Plant, p. 75). In so doing, they reversed the tactics of advertisers who co-opt oppositional subcultural referent systems to imbue their products with "alterna-cool" qualities (Frank, 1997; Rumbo, 2000b).

Culture Jamming and Cultivating Consumer Resistance

The Situationist legacy lives on in *Adbusters,* for whom "culture jamming" constitutes a new war of position to reclaim public, discursive, and psychic spaces. In *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*™, *Adbusters* editor Kalle Lasn (1999, pp. 123–126) sees the next revolution as an informational "meme war" to be waged on cultural and mental terrain. As *Adbusters*' subtitle, "Journal of the Mental Environment," indicates, fomenting revolutionary consciousness requires the cultivation of a mass "perceptual shift" that calls into question hegemonic worldviews regarding consumerism, economic growth, and the natural resource depletion these processes require ("New Way," 1998).

The content in *Adbusters* focuses on environmental, social, and psychological issues that can be grouped into two main themes—the colonization of spaces by marketing and mass media technologies and the degradation of natural environments resulting from rising global economic growth and concomitant human consumption. Whereas the former includes critiques of advertising, commodification, the limiting of "infodiversity" by mass media monopolies, and corporate control over public space, the latter criticizes how global neoliberal economic policy, modern technological advances, and consumerism have combined to deplete natural environments. Lasn's (1999, pp. 9–27) "Ecology of the Mind" links issues of psychosocial import (e.g., postmodern mood disorders, media and technology addictions, and the psychic costs of our separation from nature) with larger environmental, cultural, and political concerns.

Adbusters complements its critical content by advocating the reclaiming of a variety of spaces through civil disobedience tactics known collectively as "culture jamming" (cf. "Contested Space," 2001; "Place Jamming," 2001). These tactics are often designed to bring about consumer boycotts targeted against the products of certain companies (Friedman, 1999). For example, *Adbusters* employs public-relations strategies to change media consumption habits (e.g., the annual "TV Turnoff Week") and to demand equal access to mass communications channels, such as the democratizing communications manifesto "Media Carta." *Adbusters* also attempts to purchase airtime on major networks for anti-ads that contain anticonsumption messages. Relatedly, *Adbusters* advocates various forms of "hacktivism" as ways for activists to overcome both corporate and state restrictions on cyberspace (cf. "Hacklash," 2001).

Moving from the discursive space of mass media communication to the public space of actual retail outlets, *Adbusters* occasionally orga-

nizes point-of-purchase or "marketplace-oriented boycotts" (Friedman, 1999, p. 11) that target specific companies (e.g., Philip Morris or Nike) or entire industries (e.g., tobacco, automobiles, or petroleum). The most popular and well publicized of these boycotts is "Buy Nothing Day" (2000), which mobilizes grass-roots organizations around the world to protest consumerism at sites of consumption. Other localized strategies for culture jamming include *Adbusters*' many uses of "art as protest" designed to reclaim public space ("Reclaiming Urban Space," 2000). These include the defacing of outdoor advertising known as "billboard liberation," the public display of critically informed art works, and quarterly contests in which the object is to incorporate consumer logos and slogans into critical, anti-consumerist statements ("Creative Resistance," 2001).

Adbusters, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture

On the surface, *Adbusters*' philosophy appears to share affinities with postmodernism. Whereas *Adbusters* espouses an antiinstitutional ideology that embraces nature and radically brackets itself from modern society, postmodernism deconstructs institutionalized power relations and patterns of discrimination in order to destabilize existing sociocultural boundaries. However, although both are critical of modern progress, the former is decidedly anti-consumerist, whereas the latter tends to embody more proconsumption sentiments.

Adbusters affirms the existence of a natural and authentic self apart from consumer culture, whereas postmodern consumption disavows the possibility of authenticity to embrace fragmentation and individuation through consumer choice (cf. "Postmodern Sandwich," 1999, p. 55; Venkatesh, 1992). In so doing, the postmodern self willingly incorporates marketers' meticulously constructed consumer self into his or her psychic space and self-image. *Adbusters* also explicitly thematizes the drawbacks of a simulated world immersed in fantasy and escapism ("Great Escape," 2001), whereas more celebratory postmodernists revel in the diversions from reality that consumerism offers (cf. Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Fiske, 1989/2000).[13] Additionally, *Adbusters*' deeply ecological ethos (cf. Devall & Sessions, 1985) sees private property as ultimately belonging to nature itself, whereas postmodernism tends to stress the political significance of private identities and practices while obscuring the social and environmental consequences of privatized consumption.

As hegemonic terrain represents a shifting middle ground for strug-

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[13]Ironically, whereas postmodernism revels in the subversion of meaning, advertisers "deny the existence of pre-digested meanings and create a hunt for meaning. In the effort to deny the hegemonic content of commodity culture, advertising reroutes and constitutes it" (Goldman & Papson, 1994, p. 26).

gles between dominant and resistant groups, the Gramscian concept of hegemony has understandably attracted the interests of consumption theorists. Yet, for some more celebratory postmodern views on consumption, the vicissitudes of power and resistance are articulated solely in consumerist terms (cf. Hearn & Roseneil, 1999). According to Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 256), "as the hegemony of the market decreases, and the postmodern culture gains ground, consumers, as producers of their self-images and (hyper)realities, will find a new freedom . . ." But it is difficult to say wherein this freedom lies for the laborers and environmental resources whose subjugation under consumer capitalism makes postmodern consumption possible (Rumbo, 2000c). As Langmann (1992, p. 40) poignantly observes, because "desire and selfhood have been appropriated to secure certain social arrangements," the social costs of an increasing emphasis on consumption-based expressions of identity and empowerment may be "a deeper malaise and abandonment of the collective good." The privatizing, individualist ethos of postmodern consumption contrasts sharply with the socially and environmentally beneficial ethos of *Adbusters*. Consequently, whereas *Adbusters*' culture jamming reveals ways that consumers can embrace social contradictions to undermine the dominant hegemony, liberatory postmodern consumption is "not meant to reconcile differences and paradoxes but to allow them to exist freely" (Firat & Venkatesh, p. 252).

The shift from critical theories of consumption toward more liberatory ones looms as the work of what might be called inorganic intellectuals whose privileged status would be imperiled by a radical restructuring of free-market consumption practices and distribution channels.[14] In effect, the postmodern death of the social becomes reified and legitimated by those who stand to benefit disproportionately from the unequal distribution of consumer goods. Although Firat and Venkatesh supposedly want to situate the consumer outside of the market (see Footnote 9), the narrow focus on the liberatory dimensions of consumption conflates counterhegemonic resistance with self-indulgent purchases that line the pockets of dominant market structures themselves. Furthermore, as evidenced by the rise in media addiction, compulsive shopping, and technologically induced mood disorders, not every instance of consumption is inherently liberatory or empowering. In these and other examples, it is more accurate to say that the postmodern consumer becomes enfeebled and disempowered through addictions to cultural and material consumption rituals (Langmann, 1992).

The notion of a liberatory postmodern consumer reveling in a commodified sea of ambiguity and meaninglessness disregards the need for

[14]As naturalist author John Zerzan observes wryly, the values of postmodernism—such as technologically mediated individuation and boundary transgression—"are shared by the most ardent architects of both consumerism and capitalist globalization" ("Greasing the Rails," 2001).

consumers to develop media literacy skills that can help them to be "reflexively defiant" and to identify the unquestioned assumptions of consumerism (Ozanne & Murray, 1995, p. 522). In contrast, a Gramscian philosophy of lived praxis requires diligent cultural and intellectual preparation[15] together with political and economic organization to wage a revolutionary war against the dominant hegemony. Consumer culture becomes a battleground and not a postmodern playground.

The Politics of Anticonsumerist Resistance

Again, *Adbusters*' issues and tactics endeavor to connect local grassroots action with pressing environmental and social issues. In so doing, the magazine wages its own war of position against consumerism to cultivate a critical mindset that diversifies discursive space and seeks to reclaim public and psychic space. As *Adbusters* thematizes issues of relevance to the erosion of these spaces, it provides a "counterpublic" (Fraser, 1992, p. 116) for the intellectually reasoned exchange of alternative worldviews. Assessing the extent to which *Adbusters* may be counterhegemonic begs the question: Is it a truly open democratic forum with equitable dialogue chances for its readership? More importantly, it requires an assessment of how effective *Adbusters*' tactics have been at changing consumer attitudes and behaviors. Although the participation in contests and demonstrations by *Adbusters*' readership would suggest that the magazine's attempts to reclaim discursive space are also being made by consumers at the grass-roots level, the extent of this participation is difficult to verify empirically.

Perhaps the democratizing potential of *Adbusters* can be more accurately gauged by examining the responses in the magazine's "Letters" section. Although many of these letters are endorsements from people that *Adbusters* has inspired to take up their own culture-jamming endeavors, criticism of the magazine has grown in recent years. Much of this criticism stems from editor Kalle Lasn's definitional statement on the "New Activism" (1999). Lasn decries the narrowly conceived postmodern identity politics of splintered Leftist factions and describes culture jamming as a broad program of action that can overcome these divisions.[16] In response, *Manufacturing Consent* co-author Ed

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[15]"One can say that not only does the philosophy of praxis not exclude ethico-political history, but that, indeed . . . it consists precisely in asserting the moment of hegemony as essential to its conception of the state and in attaching 'full weight' to the cultural factor, to cultural activity, to the necessity for a cultural front alongside the merely economic and merely political ones" (Gramsci, 1995, p. 345).

[16]The subtitles of Lasn's (1999, pp. 111–121) chapter on "The New Activism (Fire in the Belly)" define the singular labels that he rejects, such as being fashionable ("We're Not Cool"), generation X ("We're Not Slackers"), intellectuals ("We're Not Academic"), feminists ("We're Not Feminists"), and most importantly the left ("We're Not Lefties").

Herman finds this program "intellectually and programmatically piti-ful," asserting that Lasn's critique of academics obscures their efforts in combating the "forces of corporate capital"[17] ("Letters," 1999, p. 12).

Although renegade academics like Herman elucidate some of the discursive and ideological limits of *Adbusters,* a more penetrating critique comes from the Canadian group L'Ombre Noire, whose "Steal Something Day" (2001) has been organized in response to BND:

> The geniuses at Adbusters have managed to create the perfect feel-good, liberal, middle-class activist non-happening. . . . A day which, by definition, is insulting to the millions of people worldwide who are too poor or marginalized to be considered "consumers" . . . The Adbusters' intelligentsia tell us that they're neither "left nor right," and have proclaimed a non-ideological crusade against overconsumption. Steal Something Day, on the other hand, identifies with the historic and contemporary resistance against the causes of capitalist exploitation, not its symptoms.

This radical communiqué illuminates problems that arise when linking splintered political factions to forge broad-based coalitions. Clearly, *Adbusters* directs its criticisms of corporate activity at large-scale corporations and not toward smaller-scale and/or ecologically conscious businesses ("Corporate Crackdown," 2000). At the same time, *Adbusters* also avoids allegiances to particular parties, making its "non-ideological crusade" an elusive one to map politically (cf. "Not Left," 2000). More importantly, with the exception of the "Letters" section, *Adbusters*' aversion to certain ideological orientations restricts its discourse to views that are compatible with its own mindset. Consequently, the magazine does not appear to represent a truly open and democratic forum. Its refusal to align itself with leftist politics can be plausibly traced to the bourgeois factions of the culture-jammers' network, which includes disaffected marketers, graphic designers, and "green entrepreneurs." As the slogan "Cultural Revolution is Our Business" (2001) indicates, the *Adbusters* brain trust borrows heavily from the corporate marketing model in creating its own socially and environmentally beneficial marketing campaigns. As a result, the *Adbusters* program may be more accurately characterized as a socially marketed politics of the mind designed to bring about a shift in popularly held perceptions about consumption.

Hegemony and the Incorporation of Opposition

The preceding critiques of *Adbusters* illustrate a recurring dilemma faced by those who want to reclaim public, discursive, and psychic

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[17]Lasn's terse and somewhat petty rebuttal asserts that Herman's response demonstrates how academics have misconstrued their intellectual exercises for active praxis: "what have you done lately besides talk and write, Mr. Herman?" ("Letters," 1999, p. 12).

spaces from powerful market forces: The realm of politics has largely been colonized and rendered mute by consumer culture. When nongovernmental organizations like *Adbusters* avoid taking explicitly political stances, they leave themselves vulnerable to criticisms from more ideologically motivated observers. In this case, the role of state intervention in ameliorating social inequality and injustice is overlooked in an amorphous and vaguely conceived nonideological crusade against consumerism.

Similarly, challengers to the powerful institutions of consumer society are also hard pressed to avoid being commodified. Moreover, those critiques that cannot be successfully reappropriated by consumer markets are routinely marginalized by their exclusion from mainstream media discourse (cf. Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, p. 249). Advertisers routinely incorporate countercultural opposition by colonizing referent systems that convey resistance to appropriate target markets and converting them into occasions for consumption (Firat & Venkatesh, p. 254; Goldman & Papson, 1996/2000, pp. 87–92). In short, advertisers continually perform culture jamming "in reverse" to defuse consumer resistance and reflexively confront viewer opposition (D. Boyns, personal communication, January 2000).

CONCLUSION

Waging war on the hegemonic terrain of consumer society has thus become fraught with the perils of co-optation and commodification. Wholly extricating consumers from spheres of consumption is an arduous and often impractical endeavor that variously requires economic resources and ascetic self-denial. For *Adbusters,* fomenting a critical consumer consciousness involves drawing attention to the latent psychological, socioeconomic, and environmental implications of consumer choices (Kellner, 1983). Often this means going "beyond the logic of consumerism" (Kellner, p. 76) to develop decentralized subsistence economies and reconstruct the self through nonconsumption strategies (Leiss, 1976). Nonetheless, as evidenced by its alliances with interests such as green entrepreneurs and the voluntary simplicity movement, *Adbusters* tacitly acknowledges that we are all still participants in consumer culture, regardless of whether or not we resist it. Although the magazine is obviously antiadvertising and anticorporate, it appears to endorse promeaningful consumption, advocating sustainable and enriching consumption practices while problematizing psychologically, socially, and/or environmentally detrimental ones. Durning's (1997/1999, p. 78) differentiation between *materialism* and *consumerism* usefully illustrates this important distinction:

> Real materialism means caring about things and taking care of them. Environmentally speaking, materialism isn't necessarily a bad thing.

Consumerism, on the other hand, is the philosophy that ever more stuff is the route to ultimate satisfaction. . . . this is incompatible with an environmentally sound economy.

Marketing to the Postmodern Consumer

Nonetheless, as the preceding analysis has sought to demonstrate, pro-meaningful consumption is hard pressed to elude the reach of market-ers. Every resistant subculture and would-be revolutionary group needs to consume *something,* whether food, shelter, politically charged attire, or, in more extreme cases, arms. This is particularly true of many environmentally conscious movements, where green marketing (Papson, 1992) has turned the ecologically sustainable and ethical consumption practices of groups such as vegetarians into niche markets (Tester, 1999, pp. 217–219). By positioning green consumption as a solution to the environmental crisis (Papson, 1992), these resistive practices have been refashioned "into an economic growth ideology" (Lukes, 1998, p. 181). The voluntary simplicity/downshifter movement has also been converted into a niche market, as evidenced by the new commodity-laden magazine Real Simple (which is published by none other than Time-Warner subsidiary Time, Inc.). In sum, although resistance by environmentally and politically motivated consumers can effect change, marketers also strengthen the consumerist hegemony by absorbing criticisms and converting such resistance into reasons for consumption.

The challenge for marketers is to examine more closely the lived practices of these anticonsumerist groups and find ways to infuse their clients' products and services into the cultural lifeblood of these subcultures. Symbolically charged markers of resistance are intricately woven into the identity matrix of the postmodern consumer, often satisfying his or her need for emotional gratification, empowerment, belonging, and outsider group acceptance (Langeland, 1999, p. 82). Fragmentary postmodern modes of lifestyle expression lend themselves particularly well to niche marketing, in some cases even presenting promotional opportunities for mass-marketed brands. Concerts, festivals, gatherings, spiritual retreats, and brazen new forms of ecotourism present varying degrees of opportunities for micro- and mass-marketed products and services.

However, the skeptical mindset of such groups frequently can make this slippery terrain for advertisers and their clients. As ideologically and emotionally charged modes of consumption wallow in the realm of irrationality, the recalcitrant and elusive postmodern consumer renders obsolete more traditional understandings of the consumer as a rationally calculating individual guided by principles of utility maximization. The contradictory consumptive impulses of more resistant organizations toward both ethical standards and identity-based ego gratification

combine to form a volatile and therefore elusive market segment (Gabriel & Lang, 1995, p. 191). This is even truer for politically motivated anti-consumerist groups than it is for environmentally and ethically minded ones (Langeland, 1999, p. 82). Because the former tend to cultivate a hostile attitude toward marketing messages, reaching them is a perpetual cat-and-mouse game in which the object is to sell without appearing to do so. In such instances, marketers must target goods and services that resonate with the earnest cultural and ethical sentiments of resistance movements while not appearing to disturb an ambiance that is typically less cluttered by selling messages than that of mainstream spheres of consumption.

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