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Jamming the Political: beyond counter-hegemonic practices

Bart Cammaerts

Abstract:

While the notion of cultural jamming has been around for several years little or no attention has gone to the appropriation of cultural jamming techniques by political actors in their political communication practices. These 'political' jams are not directed at the corporate world as such, like the cultural jam, but towards society at large or governments, towards changing values or behaviours and even at times against minorities or common enemies. The actors involved are not only radical or grassroots activists, but also professional civil society organisations, political parties and even at times government sponsored agencies. This already indicates that the political jam cannot be coined as a counter-hegemonic practice per se, as is the case with cultural jamming. Reactionary groups and mainstream political parties, as well as corporate actors are increasingly adopting these techniques. This article will address the historical cultural legacy on which cultural and political jamming builds. It will also critically assess the role of the Internet as a distributive means for political jams and its consequences for the notion of the public sphere.

Keywords:

cultural jamming, counter-hegemony, public sphere, rhizome, political communication

Short Bio:

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Introduction

Cultural jamming was introduced in popular discourse by the 'audio-DaDa' band Negativland on a cassette recording called JamCon84 released in 1985 and reissued on CD in 1994. On the tape one of the band members referred to so-called Billboard activists—altering billboards with subversive meanings—as the archetypical cultural jammer:

"As awareness of how the media environment we occupy affects and directs our inner life grows, some resist. The skilfully reworked billboard (...) directs the public viewer to a consideration of the original corporate strategy. The studio for the cultural jammer is the world at large." (Negativland, 1985/1994).

To 'sample' Berry (1995), jammers '*create with mirrors*'. Besides this, jamming is very much about what Gramsci (1971: 417) called a '*new way of conceiving the world*' and '*modifying (...) popular thought and mummified popular culture*'. In doing so, he referred to the construction of a counter-hegemony as a strategy to challenge dominant forces and discourses in society. By placing resistance, the war of position, within the realm of (mass) popular culture, Gramsci also refers to the need to translate these counter-hegemonic discourses beyond the like-minded intellectuals.

Lasn (2000: xvi), one of the co-founders of Adbusters, describes cultural jamming as '*a rebranding strategy—a social demarketing campaign*'. Jordan (2002: 102 - emphasis added), taking a more academic stance, defines cultural jamming as '*an attempt to **reverse and transgress** the meaning of **cultural codes** whose primary aim is to persuade us to buy something or be someone*'. According to Dery (1993 - emphasis added) the cultural jammer is he or she '*who intrude(s) on the intruders, investing ads, newscasts, and other media artefacts with **subversive meanings***'. Furthermore, in her book 'No Logo' Klein (2000: 281 - emphasis added) refers to the cultural jam as '*interceptions—**counter-messages** that **hack** into a corporation's own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended*'. The use of hacking by Klein also implicitly refers to hacktivism, another notion that has become very common place in recent years to coin digital activism (Jordan & Taylor, 2003).

One of the classic examples of a cultural jam is an album by Negativland called U2 with a U2-spy plane on the cover. By reversing the pop-brand U2 and relating to its original meaning, as well as using a sample of U2, Negativland deliberately confused the audience and challenged stringent copyright regulations. They were sued by the management of the rock band U2 and as a consequence went bankrupt (Negativland, 1995). Another much cited example of a cultural jam is the well documented Peretti vs. Nike-case (Peretti, 2001; Carty, 2001). Jonah Peretti, at

that time an MA-student at MIT, took advantage of a stunt that Nike launched allowing customers to order custom-made shoes by adding a word or slogan that would be printed on the shoe. Peretti chose the word 'sweatshop' to be printed on his shoes, which was of course rejected by Nike. What made this a classic jam, however, was the fact that Peretti posted his correspondence with Nike on the Internet, which in no time was forwarded and distributed throughout the world, embarrassing Nike. Also more mainstream civil society organisations, such as Greenpeace, increasingly use cultural jamming techniques in their campaigns against corporations. A good example is the 'Stop E\$\$O'-campaign, where they substituted the S with a US-dollar sign. Esso/Exxon/Mobile then decided to sue Greenpeace for infringing the copyright of its logo and for reputational damage. In reaction to the court case, that was won by Greenpeace, they launched a call to the general public to subvert the Esso logo in graphical jams (Greenpeace, 2002). The result were often cunning and witty fake logos¹.

Although cultural jamming inherently is 'political', as it reacts against the dominance of commodification and corporate actors within society and everyday life, the way it has been articulated up until now focuses foremost on attacking and mocking the capitalist corporate brand culture and not that much on the realm of politics. This article will as such not focus on cultural jamming as a counter-technique to the dominant consumer brand-oriented culture, but rather as the use of cultural jamming techniques by political actors, as well as by citizens, in their political communication within fragmented counter-public spheres, as well as in the mainstream public sphere. As such, jamming the political should also be seen as a way of dealing with the messiness of reality, as subverting meanings, and thereby using humour, mocking, satire and parody. This is not a totally new phenomenon (Hutcheon, 1994; Dentith, 2000). Besides the history of (political) parody, jamming can also be traced back to several artistic and sub-cultural movements from the beginning of 20th century through to the 1980s. However, in recent years a new wave of subversive expressions can be observed diversifying in terms of means, as well as distribution channels—of which the Internet is an important one.

Fragmented Public Spheres in the Rhizome

In some way this 'bossa nova' of subverting expressions illustrates that media have evolved even more into a heavily contested battlefield for meanings to make sense of the world, as well as for competing ideas of what citizenship—from a national, but also increasingly also from a regional or global perspective—entails. From this perspective the image of a unified rational and consensual Habermasian public sphere is difficult to sustain (Dahlgren, 2005: 152). As stated earlier the idea of cultural and political jamming is often linked to challenging dominant discourses and developing counter-hegemonic discourses. As such, the image of public 'sphericules' interacting and competing with the dominant public sphere, as introduced by Gitlin (1998) is much more helpful to understand and frame cultural/political jamming from a public sphere perspective.

However, contrary to what Gitlin and other authors, such as Putnam (2000) and Galston (2003), conclude, this differentiation and fragmentation is not per se to the detriment of democracy. This opposite view concurs with the notion of agonistic

plurality, as coined, amongst others, by Mouffe (1999). She claims that such an approach takes into account the *'multiplicity of voices that a pluralist society encompasses'* as well as *'the complexity of the power structure that this network of differences implies'* (Mouffe, 1999: 757). The argument is that, instead of threatening democracy, a plurality of oppositional discourses and social organisation is central to current notions of political mobilisation and participation, as well as eradicable. Within a democratic culture, that in itself needs to be hegemonic, passions and fierce disagreements should, according to Mouffe, not be eliminated, but actively mobilised. From this perspective the idea of both competing and interacting public spheres sounds more in tune with current expressions of alternative communication propelled by the Internet, but also radio, and can also be linked to what Fraser (1992) calls the 'subaltern counter-publics'. From a more deliberative perspective Downey & Fenton (2003: 193) refer to the difference between autonomous public spheres and counter-public spheres, whereby the latter are seen as challenging *'the dominant public sphere rather than simply be independent from it'*. Besides this, also anti-public spheres can be identified, placing themselves at the political extremes. Such extremes explicitly challenge or question the basic democratic values and are therefore described as anti-public spheres.

In figure 1 a normative (democratic) model is presented that tries to capture this complex interplay of competing and fragmented public spheres, some striving to 'hack' into the mainstream public sphere, largely controlled by market and state, others not. A distinction is also made between a democratic civil society on the one hand and a much darker undemocratic side of civil society, such as neo-Nazi or fundamentalist movements on the other. This model integrates and interrelates autonomous public spheres, counter public spheres intruding, challenging the dominant public sphere, the increased interactions and networking between different (transnationalised) public spheres and also incorporates the existence of anti-public spheres going against the basic values of democratic culture and which are often forgotten in analyses and accounts of counter-hegemonic communication.

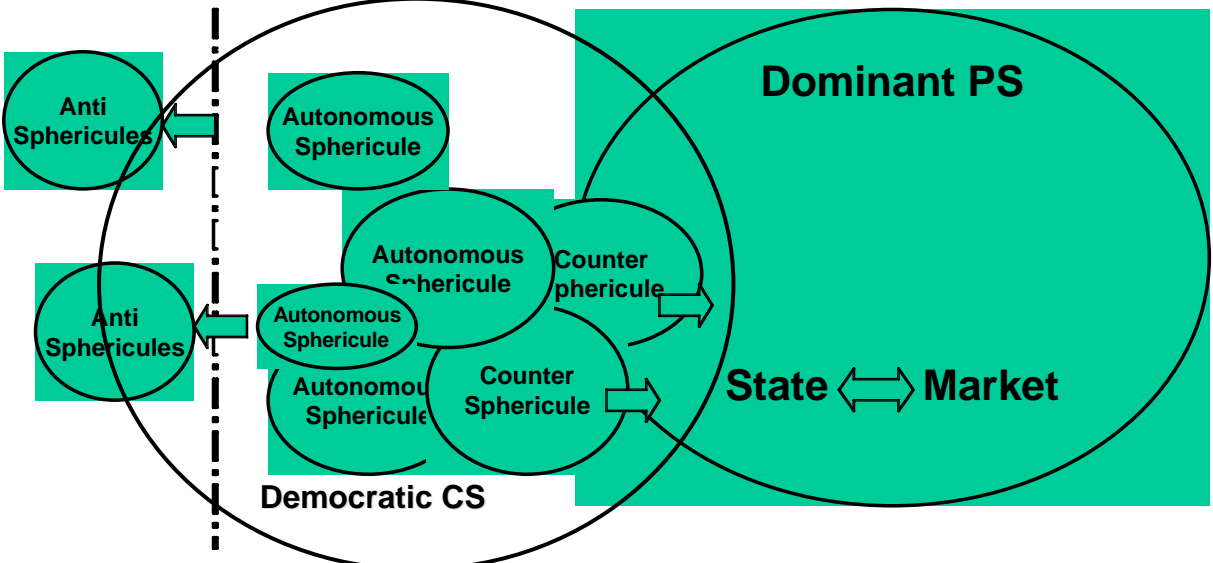


Fig. 1

This model is useful to understand jamming, as they are present in all the different kinds of sphericules, be it transgressing into the dominant public sphere, within autonomous spheres or anti-public spheres. The normativity of this model lies in the fact that in many Western democracies anti-democratic forces, such as for example neo-fascist parties, manoeuvre themselves centre stage of the dominant public sphere through the strategic use of the formal rules of representative democracy and through perverting freedom of speech rights to incite hatred, racism and intolerance. Important in this regard is not to squander the legacy and democratic values of Habermas' rationalist argument. Respect of other persuasions, mutual tolerance towards difference and what Dahlgren (2005: 153) calls *'the integrative societal function of the public sphere'* remain useful normative values, important to not slide into intolerance and outright violence between communities, religions and ethnicities.

Because the cultural and political phenomenon of jamming is present at so many different levels, moves in all different directions, it remains difficult to get to grips with it within a consistent theoretical model. However, a rhizomatic approach—as developed by Carpentier, et al. (2003) in terms of community media, thereby referring to Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome—is helpful in this regard. The rhizome *'connects any point to any point'* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 19) and is conceptualised as a dynamic, non-linear, nomadic, anarchistic and thus non-hierarchical network. In this regard the cultural/political jam, just like the metaphor of the rhizome, *'establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles'* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 7). By establishing these different interconnections it cuts across and blurs the analytical and essentialist divides between civil society activism, the state and the market, as well as dichotomous boundaries between mainstream and alternative forms of media. What jammers are doing and especially the way in which they do it, is increasingly being co-opted by government supported organisations—in information campaigns for example and by market actors—in their attempts to catch the public's attention or modify their 'corporate' image and identity, in effect going beyond counter-hegemony. Many activists also acknowledge that for an action to be successful it's not enough to communicate to an all in all small community—or ghetto—of likeminded citizens, be it local or spread around the world (Gamson & Wolfsfeld, 1993: 116). While mainstream media are often rightly criticised for their uncritical allegiance to the dominant political and economic order (Lemieux, 2000) they remain essential to reach a large audience. The metaphor of the Rhizome thus also points to the idea that communicating in an independent way through alternative means of communication and transmitting the critical counter-messages within a mainstream context are both interconnected and equally important.

We will return to these theoretical issues in the conclusions. But, first of all, the cultural and political jam has to be historically contextualised, linking it to artistic and cultural movements such as DaDa, surrealism, Fluxus and situationism. After that the notion of political jamming will be developed further as the use of cultural jamming techniques in (alternative as well as mainstream) political communication. Finally, the role of the Internet will be discussed as an additional, albeit important, means of distribution that allows the jam to spread, very much like a (media) virus.

Some History

The germs of what today is called cultural jamming—or political jamming for that matter—can be traced back to several art-movements going back to the beginning of the last century.

First of all, the idea of attributing a different meaning to an object can be found in the famous 'objects-trouvés' or ready-mades of Marcel Duchamps and DaDa-ism after World War I. Secondly, cultural jamming is also tributary to the optical illusions of surrealists, such as René Magritte, often cunningly devised to confuse the audience.

Thirdly, the art movement Fluxus, taking DaDa-ism further and establishing itself as a counter-artistic movement involved with social action, can also be related to cultural jammingⁱⁱ. Fluxus explicitly integrated making art with cultural and socio-political criticism of society and the way it functions. The phrase '*Duchamps has qualified the object into art, I have qualified life into art*' in a piece by Wolf Vostell from 1972 exemplifies this. What was also emphasised by adopting the name Fluxus, was the notion of change, interdependence and dynamism, the fast-paced non-static ever evolving flux that increasingly characterises life, the world and society. Fluxus was also influenced by what composer John Cage called the need to depersonalise art and his critique of the artist as somehow a genius (Cage, 1966).



Fig. 2

(Source: George Maciunas, 1965 - The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection)

Fourthly, situationism and its articulation of 'détournement' is probably the most relevant reference to what is today described as cultural jamming. Guy Debord and Gil Wolman (1956/translation: Knabb, 1981 - emphasis added) speak of the 'serious parody' in their *détournement*-manual:

*"It is therefore necessary to conceive of a **parodic-serious** stage where **the accumulation of detoured elements**, far from aiming to arouse indignation or laughter*

by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity."

The very idea of the parody with a serious undertone or turning meanings around resonates with reversing, transgressing or subverting meanings in the definitions of Dery and Jordan quoted earlier. An example of Situationist-art is the use of old cartoons and placing or 'situating' own content in the text-balloons. Another much used Situationist-technique is that of the (art-)performance, interventions in the public space as a form of direct action, art as a political act.

Just like Fluxus, Situationist International situated art very much within the context of the everyday and of society, thereby opposing the elitist view that art is somehow detached from or transcending society and the everyday context of so-called 'ordinary' people. The Belgian Anarchist and Situationist artist Raoul Vaneigem emphasised the everyday context very clearly in his influential book *"The Revolution of Everyday Life"*.

"Revolution is made everyday despite, and in opposition to, the specialists of revolution. This revolution is nameless, like everything springing from lived experience. Its explosive coherence is being forged constantly in the everyday clandestinity of acts and dreams." (Vaneigem, 1967)

As this quote by Vaneigem and the use of performances/spectacles show, situationism, again reminiscent to Fluxus, placed art unequivocally within the political realm. 'Art is revolutionary or is not'. As such the Situationist were very active in the 1968 spring of dissent in Paris, for example by popularising surrealist, but nevertheless very meaningful, slogans such as '*Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible!*' or '*Il est interdit d'interdire*'ⁱⁱⁱ. The movement was also very conscious of the increasingly important mediating role of media in distorting events, truth and experiences and at the same time commodifying them. This thesis was very much the focus of the famous book '*La Société du Spectacle*' by Guy Debord (1967/ translation: Knabb, 1981):

"In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation. (...) In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false."

Other influences that have shaped cultural jamming include cut-up techniques used in literature, amongst others by Brion Gysin and William Seward Burroughs (Beiles, et al, 1960) and the anarchistic DIY-culture within the punk-movement end of the 1970s, beginning of the 1980s. In this regard can also be referred to the work of Jamie Reid, responsible for the famous covers of the Sex Pistols (Reid & Savage, 1987). Finally, the notion of cultural jamming also relates very much to the notion of 'bricolage', defined by Hartley (2002: 22ff - emphasis added), referring to French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, as: *"the creation of objects with materials to hand, re-using existing artefacts and incorporating bits and pieces."*

Today's jammers have adopted, transformed and applied the different ideas that these artistic and cultural movements provided to the current economic, political

and technological context. There is clearly a pattern of continuity, not only in terms of strategies and techniques being used, but also regarding the transnational character of the movements described above. Besides this, as will be explored below, there are also patterns of discontinuity that can be observed, especially in the modes and means of distribution, but also in terms of content going beyond counter-hegemonic practices.

Jamming the Political

This article would like to highlight the use of *détournement*, intrusion, transgression and interceptions in the political realm. While recent conceptualisations of cultural jamming, as outlined before, are directed at the corporate world and its brands culture, recent evolutions have seen a shift in the use of cultural jamming as a technique towards the more overtly political. This is not to say that cultural jamming of corporate actors and brand-culture are not political, but the focus of the political jam is clearly different in that it relates more to politics as such and is directed against policies by governments, or acting against formal political actors, such as political parties, against undesirable behaviour in society or even at times against minorities in society. This also shows that the 'political' jam is not inherently progressive. While the classic cultural jam is generally portrayed and constructed as the fight of David—the inventive 'funny' activists—against Goliath—the mighty evil corporate world, the use of *détournement* in a more political context can also express feelings of intolerance, public hatred towards a common demonised enemy, such as Osama Bin Laden for example, or blatant racism towards ethnic minorities.

Firstly, a number of examples of political jams will be analysed. The selection of examples reflects the rhizomatic model in the sense that cultural jamming techniques are being used by citizens and civil society activists to denounce policies by governments, to disseminate alternative discourses, but increasingly also by more formal political actors in information or election campaigns. Secondly, we will assess the role of the Internet as a means of distributing political jams and again relate this to the rhizome in the sense of overcoming the analytical distinction that is often made between so-called new and old media.

Different cases of Jamming the Political

Some billboard activists, very much at the core of the cultural jamming movement, have shifted their attention from attacking the corporate world and its advertising to the use of purely political messages directed against dominant political thinking. Ron English is a master of the art of subversion, as he calls it. On his website^{iv} several examples of political jams can be found, such as; sampling Picassos famous painting Guernica and placing '*The New World Order*' over it, or billboards with the slogans: '*Jihad is Over (If You Want It)*' or '*One God, One Party - Republicans for a dissent free theocracy*'. This type of activism also shows that the street is increasingly becoming a space for political alternative discourses to be 'advertised'. In many countries radical activists frequently use stickers for example to voice dissent. These types of engaged street-art^v seek to subvert and at the same time reclaim public spaces with counter-messages.

The street is also the space where political resistance is being 'performed' and articulated through demonstrations. During the big demonstrations against international organisations such as the G8, the EU, as well as the recent anti-war demonstrations citizens and civil society organisations frequently use political jamming techniques to convey their subverting counter-messages. For some the act of demonstrating becomes a performance in the sense that the Situationist perceived it. This relates to what Scott and Street (2001: 42) call *'the aestheticisation of politics'*. In the different almost carnivalesk and sometimes even party-like demonstrations echo's can be found of the ironic detoured Situationist-slogans used in the May'68 protest in Paris. In the US a protester walked around draped in a US-flag his mouth covered with tape and carrying a sign that said *'Patriot Act'* (Cole, 2003). In the UK, anti-war protests demonstrators sung: *'We all live in a terrorist regime'* on the tunes of the 1966 Beatles song 'Yellow Submarine'. Other inter-linked examples of these kinds of performative subversions are slogans such as; *'Peace is Patriotic'* or *'War is Terrorism'* that found their way into anti-war protests throughout the world, which also exemplifies the transnational character of jamming, as well as its viral and copyright-free features. This can also be related to people carrying prints from jams downloaded from the Internet and the dynamic interactions between the online and the offline.

Performance is also central to activists such as the Yes men^{vi}, who famously impersonated a spokesperson for Dow-chemicals on BBC-world, claiming that Dow would compensate victims of the chemical disaster in Bhopal, India. A similar example was the 2004 campaign 'Billionaires for Bush (or Gore)' against corporate control over politics in the US, again hacking into the mainstream media. This was a deliberate tactic to catch the attention of the mainstream media and thus the public at large, as Boyd (2002)—one of the activists—stated: *"if the media wanted the humour (and they did), they had to take the content too. The materials were catchy and accessible and the action model was easy to DIY. Thus the meme 'spread, replicated, and mutated'."* As such, the main aims of their performance is to jam the media and reclaim the tools of communication from the state and the market, as the title of Gareth Branwyn's citizen's guide suggests (Branwyn, 1997).

Mainstream media also increasingly use jamming techniques in their satirical humour programs. The increased use of formats allows comedians to play with these, adopting the format, but subverting them at the same time. Such comedy shows hack human interest-kind of programs, infotainment, as well as traditional current affairs programs. Examples of these are: 'In de Gloria' produced by Woestijnvis for the Dutch-speaking Belgian public broadcaster, mocking the human interest genre, 'Broken News' on the BBC, jamming TV-news, as well as info-tainment kinds of formats or the today show with Jon Stewart in the US, who regularly uses jamming techniques.

The examples above all show the Rhizomatic behaviour of the jam, breaking down and transgressing established analytical distinctions such as online/offline or alternative/mainstream. Besides this, when analysing the jamming-phenomenon, it also becomes apparent that it's not merely performed by 'fringe' activists, but by all actors within the political domain.

Just like with the more classic ‘corporate’ cultural jams, civil society actors also increasingly use cultural jamming techniques in their political communication and politically oriented campaigns. In the run-up to the 2003 European and Regional elections in Belgium an Antwerp based multicultural radio station, supported by a broad coalition of local civil society organisations, including several allochthonous organisations, labour unions, gay organisations, even some private sector actors (such as a discotheque), and supported by a large number of individuals, launched a campaign to counter the propaganda by the North-Belgian neo-fascist party 'Vlaams Blok'^{vii}. The ‘Hate is No Solution’-campaign was set-up to counter the essentialist discourses being voiced by the nationalistic fascist party and to promote mutual understanding and respect between the different communities in Antwerp and Flanders. While the original campaign used slogans such as: *'Less Immigration, More Flanders'* or *'Less Crime, More Flanders'*, the counter-campaign reversed this by using the same layout and colours but with a completely different message, such as *'More Heart, Less Hate'* (cf. Fig. 3) or *'More Dialogue, Less Hate'*.

Fig. 3

(Source: left – <http://www.vlaamsblok.be>; right - <http://www.haatisgeenoplossing.be>)

40.000 of these political jams were also printed in poster-form. As citizens were encouraged to put them up, they could be seen throughout the city. Alternatively the posters could be downloaded from the Internet, again showing these two sides of both mobilising through the Internet, but at the same time having a visible presence in the offline world. In the UK activists in the anti-war campaigns against the New Labour government have been using similar tactics. One group subverted the original Saatchi-campaign against Labour by appropriating the slogan *'Labour isn't Working'* but adding *'For Peace'* and the line of unemployed on the original poster was replaced by a line of bombs.

Political parties themselves have also appropriated jamming-techniques in their political marketing campaigns. A prime example of this is the use of fake movie posters in party election broadcasts, as well as on huge billboards, by New Labour in the 2001 general election campaign in the UK. One featured William Hague, the then Tory party leader, with the haircut of Margaret Thatcher combined with the slogan *'Get out to Vote or They Get In'*. Another poster related to high number of houses being repossessed by banks due to high interest rates and read *'Return of the Repossessed'* with the Tory leaders depicted as zombies, with the sub-title *'No Home is Safe from Spiralling Tory Interest Rates'*. The third jammed film-poster Labour used was called *'Economic Disaster II'* starring Michael Portillo as Mr.Boom and William Hague as Mr.Bust, *'coming to a home, hospital, school and business near you'* (cf. Fig. 4).

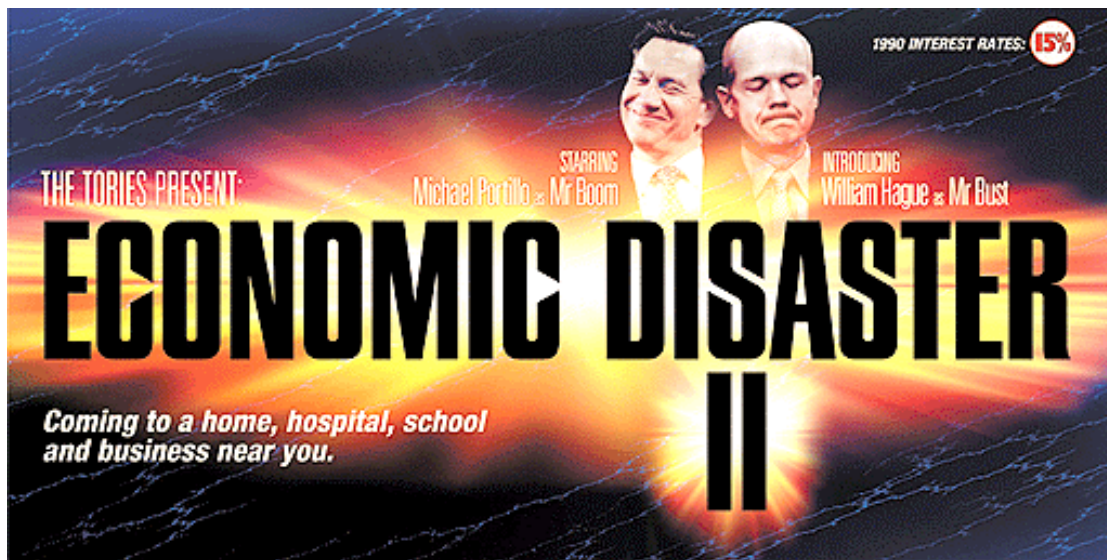


Fig. 4

(Source: New Labour, TBWA-London)

This use of humour with a serious undertone in a political campaign, though perceived by some observers as very populist, did strike a chord with the (young) electorate and was intended to convince voters that the Tory party was not to be trusted as well as induce fear over a Tory victory. Moreover, it gave New Labour free publicity by the mainstream media in an up until then rather dull and uninspiring election campaign. In this regard Smith (2001: 2003) claims that:

"Humour was used to good effect in 2001 to position the opposition negatively (a la Hague with Thatcher's hair) and may increase in the future. It offers the desired effect whilst not alienating those who dislike personal negative advertising. (...) it seems likely that greater creativity and scope will develop - if for no other reason than the electorate is increasingly sophisticated and unimpressed by traditional negative approaches"

Finally, public information campaigns, although less prominent, also at times use cultural jamming techniques to convey messages of public interest. An example of this is a controversial campaign by a Dutch semi-public organisation called SIRE, focussing on anti-social and rude behaviour of citizens and youngsters. The title of the campaign was 'Society is You'. It used the metaphor of children-booklets hacking

Dick Bruna's simplified but highly successful images with a similar layout and language^{viii}. This refers also in part to the *détournement* of cartoon balloons by the Situationists. In figure 5 a grandmother is depicted accompanied by the following text: *'Mies sits in the tram. There comes grandmother. "Can I sit there, I am old and a bit tired". "Piss off you old cow", says Mies. Grandmother is crying. Mies is Happy. Now she can stay sitting.'* (translation by the author). Others related to the chanting of anti-Semitic slogans by football supporters, sexual harassment of women, or using a mobile in the movie theatre. Besides the posters, radio-ads using children's music and the texts were also produced and transmitted.



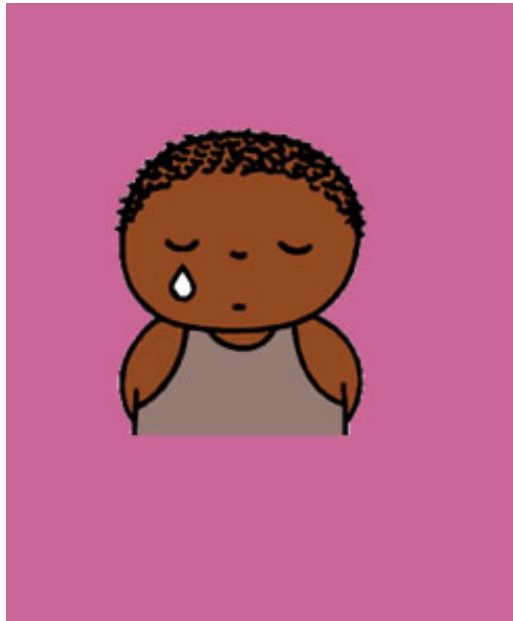
Fig. 5

(Source: <http://www.sire.nl>)

Interestingly enough this campaign was designed by the private advertising agency Lintas, again showing the blurring of boundaries between civil society, formal political actors and the private sector, to which the Rhizome also refers.

To make the circle round, this campaign in turn was hacked and mocked by activists and citizens playing around with the same idea of children's imagery and language, but using different targets for their mockery, often not so innocent or public interest minded. In a sense this could be seen as a parody of the parody.

Examples of the latter are a number of similar jams joking about (hard) drug-use or worse voicing racist discourses and prejudices against migrant populations. One pretty disgusting example of this has an angry weeping allochtonous child on the left and the following message on the right: *'Hassan is mad. He said to girl: "you cannot see Moroccans". Girl nevertheless sees Moroccans. Hassan rapes girl with 13 friends. Well done Hassan. This is real integration'* (cf. Fig. 6 - translation by the author). These examples shows that political jams are not *per se* progressive, but can also contain essentialist racist (counter-)discourses that could be considered as anti-public spheres.



Integratie

Hassan is boos.

Hij heeft gezegd tegen meisje:

"jij mag niet omgaan met marokaan".

Meisje gaat toch om met marokaan.

Hassan verkracht met 13 vrienden meisje.

Goedzo Hassan.

Dit is pas integreren.

Fig. 6 (from the author's archive)

The Internet as a means of distribution for Jams

Although some research has been published recently in terms of the use of the Internet by activists (Meikle, 2002; Jordan, 2002; Couldry & Curran, 2003; Atton, 2004), it remains difficult to assess exactly how far and extensive the distribution of jams is, but it would be fair to state that many Internet users worldwide have at one time or another received a political jam in their mailbox. Moreover, world events or conflicts such as 9/11 and the subsequent US-led wars against the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Baath-regime in Iraq have resulted in a sheer explosion of political jams, usually distributed and dispersed through the Internet (Ellis, 2002; Frank, 2004). In figures 7 and 8 a few examples of this can be seen. They came to me through e-mail or were found on sites dedicated to these kinds of jams. As such, there are no sources available for many of these jams, which in itself is significant.

A well-known and widely distributed political jam is the poster of Star Wars, re-engineered to Gulf Wars, episode II - clone of the attack, see. Similar jams of movies or TV-series, using 9/11, Bush, Osama Bin Laden or the war in Iraq and Afghanistan include, amongst others, the Matrix, Face/Off, Escape from New York, Natural Born Killers, Terminator, the Tele(terror)tubbies or the 80s TV-series the A-team. Besides films or TV-series, cartoons like Southpark, the Simpson's, or Spiderman, and computer games like Flight Simulator, SimCity, or Tomb Raider, have also been jammed to mock recent US-politics.



Fig. 7 (from the author's archive)

The technique of photo doctoring is also often used to fake images such as Saddam Hussein being presented as a DJ, George Bush morphed with Osama bin Laden, or less innocent, a picture of Mecca with a plane heading towards the Kaaba with the subtitle '*an eye for an eye*', or variations on that theme (cf. Fig. 8). This again shows that political jamming is not only 'performed' by progressive voices and activists, but also serve to ridicule, humiliate or victimise the common enemy or the personification of evil at that given moment in time (Silverstone, 2006). Religion is a prime target in this regard, as is being shown in figure 8 with the depiction of Osama Bin Laden with pigs, a severe insult to Muslims world-wide and also in the *détournement* of the French sports newspaper l'Équipe, representing the 9/11 WTC-attack as a goal in a deadly football match between religions.

Besides this, it's fair to state that there are thousands of other examples of similar political jams circulating the Internet. They can also not be reduced to criticising or even supporting US-policies with regard to Iraq or Afghanistan, but relate as much to other (local) political contexts and issues.

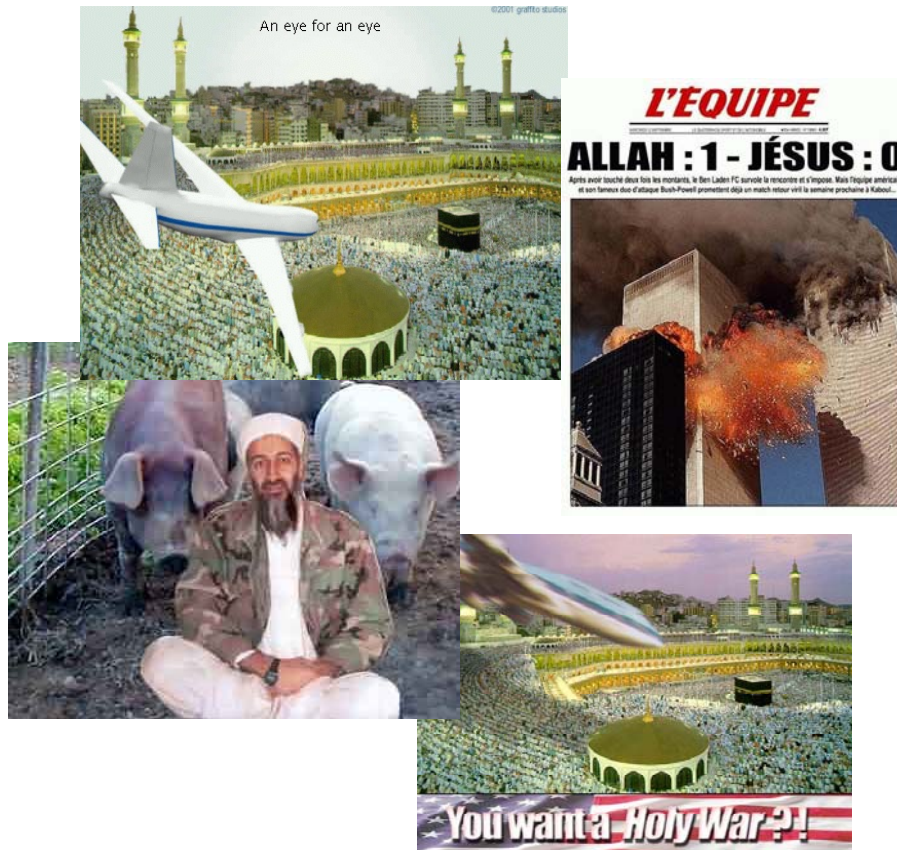


Fig. 8 (from author's archive)

The Internet serves, in this regard, very much as a new means of distribution and its viral characteristics allows the cultural or political jam to spread very fast across borders and at minimal costs to the producers. Citizens forward the jam to their professional and/or personal networks who then in turn spread it further (Frank, 2004: 637). Peretti (2001) also emphasised this decentralised distribution feature of the Internet when he contemplated on the effects of his Nike-jam:

"The dynamics of decentralized distribution systems and peer-to-peer networks are as counterintuitive as they are powerful. By understanding these dynamics, new forms of social protest become possible, with the potential to challenge some of the constellations of power traditionally supported by the mass media."

However, it would be wrong to overemphasise the importance of the Internet. Some of the examples put forward in this article point to the fact that other media are equally, or indeed even more important to spread the counter-discourses beyond the cosy circle of likeminded. The coalition of civil society organisations that initiated the counter-campaign against the fascist party in Antwerp, built a nice website, but nevertheless had 40.000 posters printed to be visible in the street throughout the city, which also in part contributed to their action getting attention in the mainstream press. Transgressing the boundaries between alternative media-spheres and the mainstream public sphere, as well as between old and new media, is crucial in this regard. When referring to tactical media as a form of digital interventionism the Critical Art Ensemble (2002: 7) states the following: *'By "digital" CAE means that tactical media is about copying, re-combining, and re-presenting, and not that it*

can only be done with digital technology.' This points to a non-deterministic perspective with regard to media and technology, as well as breaking down dichotomies between different kinds of media, as implied by the metaphor of the Rhizome.

Although the Internet plays an ever increasing role in building and maintaining networks, in the distribution of new ideas, tactics and strategies, in informing independently at low cost, at decentralising political action, this should be seen in conjunction with other media usages and not in a dichotomous perspective of 'old' versus 'new' media. Besides this, we also see that jams at times make it into the mainstream media or popular culture.

What to make of all this?

Although the notions of cultural and political jamming are fairly new, they should be seen within an evolutionary perspective of the relationship between culture and politics or more specifically between art and social struggles. Cultural/Political jamming also embodies the de-elitisation of art and allows the citizen/activist to voice dissent and challenge dominant discourses in society. Besides this, also patterns of discontinuity can be observed. They foremost refer to the means of distribution of jams, where the Internet plays a pivotal role in spreading the jam very much like a virus. Although, the street and classic media still play an important role to communicate the jam beyond the (rather fragmented) subaltern public spheres.

When we look at the use of cultural jamming techniques in the political realm from a public sphere perspective, they do produce a wide diversity of subverting narratives and alternative discourses. Democracy needs contestation, as well as the acknowledgement that there are different interests at play that need to be made visible and explicit. In many ways, politics ceases to be politics when all discourses converge on the so-called 'radical centre', when antagonisms are denied or silenced. Fragmented sphericules that operate sometimes outside, other times in partial overlap with the dominant mainstream public sphere, and where new ideas of citizenship and of participation are deepened, debated and consulted are in themselves not to the detriment of democracy, providing these ideas permeate into the dominant public sphere to a wider audience of citizens at some moment in time. This also relates to what Deleuze & Guattari (1987: 216-217) call the ongoing negotiations between the molecular or micro level of politics and the molar or the structural segmentations at a macro-political level: *'Molecular escapes and movements would be nothing if they did not return to the molar organisations to reshuffle their segments, their binary distributions of sexes, classes and parties'*.

But how far can we stretch Mouffe's plea for a radical plurality of voices? Does it for example include the racist discourses as seen in the Dutch case? Mouffe (1997: 18) herself suggests that certain limits should be observed when placing radical plurality central to democracy. The democratic culture of tolerance, solidarity, equality, freedom, have to be accepted as hegemonic. Discourses, as present in anti-public spheres, challenging the very nature of that democratic culture; such as negationism, (verbal) gay bashing, blatant racism, promotion of hatred, violence and

other essentialisms are problematic and undoubtedly raise questions regarding freedom of speech and the limits thereof.

A rhizomatic approach to media activism, as developed by Carpentier et al. (2003) in terms of community media, proves to be an adequate model to also frame the notion jamming, both in its corporate as well as more overtly political focus. It allows us to see the jam as nomadic moving from autonomous public spheres to counter-public spheres to the mainstream public sphere, thereby disturbing or deterritorialising, as Deleuze & Guatarri would say, the status quo. It also refers to inter-linkages between citizens, civil society, the state and the market, as well as the appropriation of jamming techniques by these different actors. Furthermore it also allows us to go beyond the dichotomous representations of old versus new media and see them in conjunction and interaction with each other instead of essentialising them.

However, although the rhizomatic approach does capture – metaphorically – the way in which jamming transgresses boundaries, it does not problematise this enough in terms of power and counter-hegemony.

This brings us to the question what difference these phenomena make on a macro-political level? Does it really challenge hegemonic power-constellations? The answer to this is, of course, not straightforward. As shown above the technique of jamming is increasingly being appropriated by reactionary and ‘mainstream’ actors, including market actors, attempting to unjam the jam. The interplay between the micro political—where the jam can often be situated—and the macro political is also a complex and dynamic process that cannot be understood within a linear, causal relationship of stimulus-response. However, sometimes effects can be seen, but clearly in combination with other forms of direct action. In this regard can be referred to jams directed against (some) corporations. Companies such as Shell, Esso, Nike and McDonalds, for example, are slowly beginning to see that their corporate image is being damaged by a sustained protest campaign whereby cultural jamming is only one facet, as consumer boycotts are much more powerful in terms of actually accomplishing (minor) results. Also, the attention of cultural jammers is often quite selective—while McDonalds is being targeted, Burger King or Wendy’s is not. However, effect (right now) is maybe the wrong question here. Changing social, political and/or cultural values is a slow process that needs to be contextualised and placed in a long-term perspective (cf. Hall, 2002: 25-26). Furthermore, as was shown, jammers focussing on politics are much more diverse ideologically and also voice sentiments of hatred and violence, essentialising entire (religious) communities and populations. This is far removed from the revolutionary ideals of the Fluxus and Situationist legacies that saw in *détournement* a way of inciting citizens to think differently by engaging with them within their everyday life contexts.

However, in a world of green-washing, spin and other newspeaks—*the true is a moment of the false*—the jam is not inherently progressive anymore, it no longer fosters the ideals of the Enlightenment, nor does it automatically challenge the status quo or strive to extend rights for citizens at large. Some political actors, as well as companies just use jamming techniques as a ‘hip’ political communication strategy, thereby reducing it to a marketing technique, unjamming the jam so to speak.

Others use it to demonise and essentialise a common enemy or ethnic/religious minority. For mainstream broadcasters jamming is often 'just entertainment'. It therefore remains important to not be too celebratory about these phenomena and take into account Baudrillard's (1987) criticism that media create an over-saturated hyper-reality that can potentially lead to the implosion of meaning, whereby the jam represents merely another 'noise' amongst other noises.

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Notes:

ⁱ The result of this campaign can be seen on URL: <http://www.stopesso.org/static/logos.html>

ⁱⁱ A recent adbuster campaign, unbrand America, used an American flag with corporate logo's instead of stars. This shows strong resemblance to the American flag designed by Fluxus artists George Maciunas to protest against American imperialism (cf. Fig. 2).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Be realistic - demand the impossible! / It is forbidden to forbid*

^{iv} See URL: <http://www.popaganda.com/>

^v For more examples of street-art see URL: <http://www.woostercollective.com/>

^{vi} See <http://www.theyesmen.org/>

^{vii} Due to a conviction for disseminating persistent racist discourses 'Vlaams Blok' recently changed its name to 'Vlaams Belang', which comes down to a change in form, but not in substance

^{viii} Dick Bruna is best known for his Miffy (Nijntje in Dutch) character, a rabbit that is universally appealing to young children