

Alternative Media:  
Commodification and the Vexing Coordinates of Alterity

Cyrus Lewis

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By: Cyrus Lewis

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Julian Awwad Chair

Peter Van Wyck Examiner

Kim Sawchuk Examiner

Owen Chapman Supervisor

Approved by Rae Staseson  
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Brian Lewis  
Dean of Faculty

Date April 15 2012

## ABSTRACT

### Alternative Media: Commodification and the Vexing Coordinates of Alterity

Cyrus Lewis

The deleterious effects of commodification on media content, particularly of an oppositional or politically committed nature, that is, media often classified under the rubric “alternative,” is well documented. This thesis attempts to wrestle with this puzzle and to unpack some of alternative media’s more curious attributes; i.e., the frustrating truth that alterity is a relational phenomenon, more sensitive to the vagaries and caprices of the market than its desire for autonomy would indicate; the profound fact that it is not so “alternative” as it seems to presuppose, as evidenced in its periodic reinvigoration of the markets of “popular culture;” and the intriguing point that its aspirations, more often than not, appear to cohere with mass culture’s lionization of individuality. At the heart of this paradox is a yearning for that nebulous characteristic of “authenticity.” That narratives of authenticity attend most instantiations of alterity and alternative media is no accident. But authenticity itself is as bound up with the ascension of capitalist modernity and the liberal public sphere as are notions of alterity. By examining alterity, with an eye on its cognate of authenticity, it is possible to highlight some of alternative media’s immanent contradictions.

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## Introduction

Alternative Media labors in the shadow of commodification. This is nowhere more obvious than in the fact that writing about alternative media necessitates a discussion of commodification. Alternative media's *alterity* is relational: It defines itself in contrast with "mass culture," which, generally speaking it abhors or attempts to defy. The central question that this thesis is ultimately concerned with exploring is how processes of commodification are experienced and/or navigated by cultural producers whose bailiwick is imagined to be "alternative." What options do cultural producers of alternative media have in the face of ever more rapid and pervasive commodification? Can creative practice still engender political possibilities? Does the oftentimes opprobrious material of alterity ultimately do more damage than good (i.e., What can be said of the value, paid to transgression in the denomination of cultural attention, in narratives of cultural resistance)?

This research is not concerned with the resistant consumer, a figure whose presence often attends discussions of oppositional culture. If the profusion of choice and the superficially subversive in popular culture is sufficient to undermine some of the claims of the possibility of resistance in reception -- in that popular culture becomes a surrogate for politics while putting a gloss on power relations -- it seems advantageous to discuss these selfsame issues as they relate to the production end of the cycle of production. My research, in this respect, is rooted in a Marxist orientation. Moreover, a running supposition of this thesis, mapped out explicitly in my discussion of commodity fetishism in Chapter 3, stems from Marx's most central criticism of labour under capitalism. This

criticism maintains that labour does not, in fact, exist separately from labourers and that putting labour into the market as a commodity ensures that the web of social relations between labourers are subjected to market vagaries, which in turn has a pernicious effect on social fabrics (Marx, 1906). Commodity fetishism, which grants the value of human relations to things, implies that subjects are already implicated in the system of social relations they wish to criticize. This insight undergirds the observation that, under monopoly capitalism, cultural production can easily be recuperated in such a way as to aestheticize politics (Benjamin, 1968) and that under contemporary capitalism, *oppositional* cultural production can be recuperated in the same way. Benjamin's observations about Nazi rallies and affective appeals -- the aestheticization of politics -- are perhaps responsible for the popular opinion of the political left that the inverse, that is, the politicization of aesthetics, packs some resistant punch. But while some argument may be mustered for the fact that political aesthetics were deeply implicated in the social movement of the 60s, there can be no doubt now that this selfsame radical impulse reanimates a frequently moribund pop culture market (invigorating the cultural marketplace belonging to the "one-dimensional man" of 1950s suburbia). This market valorization of transgression recuperates the oppositional impulse ruthlessly. So it is, for example, that we find the Palestinian Keffiyah, divorced of its political signification, rendered a fashion accessory, much like its more ubiquitous brethren, the omnipresent Che Guevara t-shirt, by the new bourgeois 20-something countercultural maven, the much-hyped and often maligned "hipster."

Lest the reader labour under the misapprehension that the forthcoming meditation is blinkered by its adherence to Marxist analysis, that is, liable to perseverate on issues of production, it is perhaps worthwhile to remember that Marx's formulation of the model of production was dialectical. Production, distribution, exchange and consumption each represented a moment in a circuit in which each instance had some modicum of determinacy over the other moments. As Stuart Hall notes in his writing on the introduction of Marx's *Grundrisse*, the (cyclical) relationship of production to consumption is threefold: "First, production furnishes consumption with its 'object.' Second, production specifies the *mode* in which the object is consumed. But, third, production produces the need which its object satisfies" (1974). Anchoring analysis in Marxist orientation means that one must necessarily be vigilant about the mobius-strip-like loop of production. Indeed, the question of reception is repeatedly broached via the theoretical apparatuses I have conscripted to wrestle with the manner in which notions of alterity are disseminated and understood, i.e., its communicative circuit. Both Thorstein Veblen's theory of invidious comparison and John Durham Peters' schematic of "abyss-artistry" and "abyss-redemption" are pivotal mechanisms through which I attempt to uncover those forces that are complicit in raising the profile, esteem or seriousness with which forms of alternative media are perceived and received by both their producers and consumers. Both concepts are mapped out in Chapter 1, wherein I also give summary attention to the literature attending alternative media.

Over the course of my research, I repeatedly ran afoul of notions of "authenticity." Indeed, I discovered that conceptions of alterity almost always accompany invocations of

authenticity. Consequently, interrogations of authenticity attend my inquiry into the coordinates of alterity in the forthcoming, culminating, in Chapter 2, in my coining the term, “Lokiist-authentic,” which I use to refer to authenticity’s frequently duplicitous and highly contextual character. It is largely because of my eventual reckoning with authenticity as a *rational* desire to evade or combat the estranging forces of commodified culture that I attempt to circumvent theories of (all encompassing) ideological interpolation and/or hegemony. Opposition to the dominance of capital is, to my mind, expressed in the high regard that alterity receives and is consequently far more common than is often presupposed. This does not mean, however, that it is not immersed in a thicket of problems. All of these issues are brought to bear in Chapter 3 with the example of Tactical Media, a contemporary manifestation of alternative media, which is recruited as a sort of case study or guinea pig for the theoretical concepts introduced in the first 2 chapters. Portions of Chapter 3 were originally published, *in media res* as it were, on *Jacobin Magazine’s* blog.<sup>1</sup> They have been significantly modified.

Joseph Heath has wryly commented on the pitfalls often attached to theoretical contortions, observing that “relying upon elaborate theoretical constructions in lieu of moral claims ([is a strategy] that violates one of the most fundamental rules of argument, viz. that one cannot derive possible conclusions - e.g., workers are badly treated, people are sexually repressed -- from anything intrinsically less plausible -- e.g., Hegelian dialectics, the struggle for Eros and Thanatos)” (*Veblen*, 3). I would like to include the consideration, however, that elliptical or cater-cornered explorations can result in fertile

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<sup>1</sup> See: <[jacobinmag.com/blog/2011/09/the-anarcho-liberal-considered/](http://jacobinmag.com/blog/2011/09/the-anarcho-liberal-considered/)> and <[jacobinmag.com/blog/2011/11/the-anarcho-liberal-considered-pt-ii/](http://jacobinmag.com/blog/2011/11/the-anarcho-liberal-considered-pt-ii/)>

interpretations and that elucidation does not always have to be riveted to the economy of formula. I hope that the following, occasionally tangential musings, illuminate at least as often than they might confound and that there may be moments of discovery amongst the sometimes excursive probing and groping.

## Chapter 1

### **Wrestling with Alternative Media / Oppositional Cultural Production and its Buoying of the Rebel Consumer and Status Hierarchy**

All aware people of our time  
agree that art can no longer be  
justified as a superior activity,  
or even as an activity of  
compensation to which one  
could honorably devote oneself.  
-- Guy Debord, "Methods of  
Détournement," 1956

#### **A: Alternative Media: A Hazy Shade of Woolly Imprecision**

"Alternative media," my ostensive object of concern, is not easy to delineate or explain. It is generally understood to have some connection to "politics of resistance," but given that such politics subsume groups as dissimilar as the far left international anarchist collective CrimethInc. and American white supremacist group, Stormfront, appealing to unqualified markers of political or social intransigence does not appear to offer much clarity. CrimethInc. would take violent umbrage at having any of its works colligated with Stormfront literature, even if done in the name of a shared commitment to struggles against normativity and domination in, say, an anthology sympathetic to conspiracist conceptions of oppression called *You are Controlled by Men with Monocles*. The fact that the term "alternative media" is so easily made a contentious one attests to its shaky ontology and equivocal condition or character. Loosely defined, it is cultural production that strives to offer an alternative to corporate mass media or government controlled media, but, of course, what constitutes this alterity is not easy to determine. Indeed, the lion's share of the forthcoming meditation will wrestle with the characteristics belonging to "alterity" and alterity's peculiar relationship with "authenticity." Moreover, the term

“media” itself, even in its “alternative” iterations, is a deeply imprecise designation. If we accept that the extravagant interpretive faculties of humanity have allowed for a world of profligate semiosis, then there is really no bounds on what, a medium merely being that through which a message may be transmitted, media can be thought to refer to. Of course, for clarity’s sake, when we discuss “media” it is often understood to be shorthand for “The Media,” that is, the “content generators” of the news and entertainment complex of our historical moment. This formulation does play to some discussions of alternative media, which I will touch on briefly, as with those factions of alternative media which are concerned with acting as correctives for the news media. But while I do not want to attempt to make a case for alternative media referring to an ineffable plurality, a move that would risk a tumble into nebulosity, I do want to take advantage of the term’s heterogeneity so as to discuss its more “artistic” manifestations. Much time and energy could be dedicated to belabouring considerations of when and how the Fine Arts ought to be differentiated from alternative media.<sup>2</sup> To short-circuit this potential problem, I intend on discussing alternative media more as a category of antinomian discontent than a recognizable configuration.

As with pornography -- another equally slippery designation -- I would like to argue that alternative media is more determined by its historical context than it is a set of

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<sup>2</sup> This is arguably due to the rigorous policing of the art world’s borders. Radical art, as a constituent part of Fine Art territory, is safeguarded as “autonomous” even if it strives to counteract the superciliousness which characterizes the dubious claim of sovereignty in the first place. The art world might allow “alternative media” to promulgate its functions and discuss its dinner parties, but it would never deign to take shelter under such a dirty proletarian rubric. This is because, as Hito Steyerl notes, “production of art presents a mirror image of postdemocratic forms of hypercapitalism that looks set to become the dominant political post-Cold War paradigm” (32). Art production is often itself a trojan horse for neoliberal trends. Consideration of this phenomenon, in the forthcoming discussion, will be inversely proportionate to the attention I give any further distinction between alternative media and art.

formal features or comprised of discernibly stable content or an identifiable essence. Like material deemed “obscene,” to which alternative media can oftentimes belong, it is easiest to say of it that “I know it when I see it,” than it is to point to a feature belonging to it that might not change over time. It is exactly alternative media’s amorphousness that I am exploiting when I use the term to point to a panoply of methods, materials and activities: In foisting oppositional creative enterprise under the rubric “alternative media,” I am knowingly taking advantage of its capaciousness to make it stand in for all “Oppositional Cultural Production.” That having been said, I will, on occasion, use this more awkward sobriquet (“Oppositional Cultural Production”), and others besides, to indicate my objects of discussion. I am aware that there are numerous cultural phenomena referred to by the adjective “oppositional” well in excess of my focus of interest. It will become obvious, I hope, that the ambit of my subject is distinguished by left-leaning, anti-capitalist, so-called “progressive” characteristics and/or gestures of dissent that are not stained by cretinous chauvinism. The fact that there also exists pernicious and noxious elements -- such as the aforementioned neo-Nazi group, Stormfront -- which can be said to labor beneath a heading of “oppositional,” I will leave to sociological studies, the passage of time, and a hope for the existence of divine requital. I am aware that heaping such disparate forms and content under one monolithic rubric risks running afoul of Bernard Miegé’s muscular critique of Horkheimer and

Adorno's equally totalizing term, "Culture Industry."<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, for the discussion at hand, and with the aim of broadstrokes purposes in mind, alternative media will subsume all other categories of cultural production that I may here consider.

While it may be true that the term "alternative media" is itself very recent, so too is the fact that it has harbingers dating back, at least, to the early 19th century and the Romantic idea of the rebellious artist. To seek forebears prior to this point is certainly not impossible, but I would argue that alternative media is most recognizable as a species of cultural production after the advent of industrial capitalism and the rise of the bourgeoisie and public sphere. Consequently, to find ancestors dating back before the 18th century, one would likely be examining family members in more a spiritual sense than a genetic one. In any case, it will not here be possible to delve too deeply into the genealogy of alternative media, unfortunately, though I will examine some of its lineage shortly. Suffice it to say for the interim that its myriad forms speak, in part, to its contingent and querulous nature: the development of alternative media in many ways can be seen to chart the changes in political and cultural opposition to oppressive or dominant forms of governance and/or the dominative forces of capital. Consequently, much alternative media, like comedy, does not retain much potency when it is past its due date. One generation's "alternative media" may form the next's stockpile of material for mordant humour, as with Millennial's ironic appropriation of 1980s New Wave futurism or the late

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Capitalization of Cultural Production* Mieke argues that the totalizing designation of the "culture industry" overlooked the fact that cultural production is actually the result of culture *industries*. The inattention paid to the different logics of production belonging to disparate industries of culture -- e.g., broadcasting being wholly dissimilar to print -- is due to Horkheimer and Adorno's focus on the market itself. Mieke is probably right that this effectively meant that their critique was thereby inadvertently framed by the functioning of market values. Be that as it may, the term "culture industry" retains a critical savoir-faire and is undeniably useful in referring to capitalist media writ large.

1970s' gleeful defilement of sacred cows from the hippie era. From the leafletting and socialist magazines of the turn of the century to today's enthusiasm for "culture-jamming," tactical media<sup>4</sup> and digital activism, alternative media has changed drastically over the course of the 20th century in nature, character and form. Alongside this development has been concomitant anxiety and critique about the effectiveness, salubriousness and autonomy of alternative media, in both academic and creative spheres. What I am describing here is the tension that exists between cultural production and incorporation by the market. Essentially, this anxiety and critique boils down to concerns about the effects of commodification on alternative media, although it may not always be discussed in these terms. Because alternative media represents an incorrigible rejection of authority -- contumaciousness arguably being alternative media's one constant -- it is impossible to adequately describe or discuss it without recourse to the antagonism that exists between it and the cash nexus. To discuss alternative media then is to discuss commodification. Although I will proceed to a more thorough discussion of commodification in the next chapter, its interrelation with alternative media is so extensive -- it is like some Siamese Hyrda -- that I cannot help but discuss it in this chapter as well; it is the yang to alternative media's yin (or vice versa).

The tension between "mass culture" and the oppositional nature of alternative media may be far more complicated than is often presupposed, insofar as the latter periodically reinvigorates the former; nonetheless, the market's assimilation of alternative media's heterodoxy and transgressive productions cannot be denied. In fact, it is arguably

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<sup>4</sup> Methodologies that, as of this writing, may be losing some of their vogue to the game changer that is Occupy Wall Street (OWS). See chapter 3.

a readily understood part of the process of artistic production, made most visible by the music industry. Thanks to the enormous success of “dangerous” 70s arena rock and roll, mass culture has witnessed first hand the incorporation of disaffection. The turgid rebellion of Led Zeppelin-esque arena rock scarcely had time for its potency to become suspect before punk rock began to spit on the formal excesses of late 60s/early 70s sonic habit and wont. Punk rock had several years of “underground” vim and vigour before it too became a largely ersatz genre of paint-by-numbers content. It’s a well known tale: Leadbelly becomes Blues Hammer; Charles Mingus becomes Kenny G; Dead Kennedys become Avril Lavigne. (Not to give the impression that this phenomenon is the exclusive domain of the musical arts; e.g., graffiti art, that erstwhile exemplification of urban insubordination instantiates itself as the highest grossing art object in world history;<sup>5</sup> Marcel Duchamp becomes Damien Hirst; Hugo Ball becomes an apolitical self-aggrandizing fashionista, etc, etc). I will return often to the conspicuous phenomenon of musical rebellion’s market appropriation as it is instructive. Indeed, trying to turn up some information on jazz, as the parlous and subversive musical form it was understood for decades to be, using the search terms “jazz” and “dangerous,” will likely provide you with search-engine results for Oakley’s limited edition women’s sunglasses, “Jazz DANGEROUS.” Anecdotal evidence of this kind would be absurd and pointless if not for its obviousness and notorious ubiquity. There is no need for me to invent a brand of sunglasses called “Jazz DANGEROUS” in order to make this point -- it is tacitly understood that a quick internet search will provide such an item. The interminable

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<sup>5</sup> Graffiti artist David Choe painted murals on the offices of Facebook and was paid in stock options. When Facebook went public, Choe’s options were estimated at \$200 million. See “David Choe, Facebook’s Millionaire Graffiti Artist.” *The Daily Beast*, 3 Feb 2012.

corporate takeover of countercultural leitmotifs of rebellion is easily understood as a tragic joke; it is the sort of thing that might constitute a quip on *The Simpsons*.

Attendant to (and, in some case, intertwined with) the American variant of the New Left, hippy fashions reached their stylistic apex in the “counterculture” of the late 1960s and early 1970s and remain one of the most obvious touchstones of (ostensible) oppositional culture : the colourful campus demonstrations, bead-wearing, long hair and beards, the re-purposing of military jackets as the garb of hippie peaceniks or yippie revolutionaries set to overwhelm the establishment, etc. But this idea is increasingly understood to be patently absurd; “the man” simply joined in the chorus and started singing hosanna to rugged individualism, which was a foundational myth of Americana in the first place. In retrospect, this insight seems hardly revelatory: wasn’t abstract expressionism heralded, in the robustly conservative 1950s, as marking American individualism in opposition to the tyrannical Stalinist dictates behind Soviet Realism?<sup>6</sup> Wasn’t manifest destiny invoked in all those old western movies? Wasn’t the stentorian screeching of long-haired hippies, constantly played on the radio, a highly popular multi-million dollar celebration of Dionysian impulses? Sadly, although hippie culture is now recognized as naive and, in its almost baroque fashion sensibilities and tumid musical stylings, highly pretentious (thus ironically belying its eschewal of “phoniness” and all things bogus), its legacy is kept alive in the persistence of the same operational *narrative*: that mass culture is making hamburger of all its radical individuals (as in that memorable scene of the school-children walking the meat-factory plank in Pink Floyd’s

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<sup>6</sup> After allowing for decades of speculation on the topic, the CIA finally admitted to promoting the Abstract Expressionist movement via covert funding to traveling exhibitions and art journals. See Frances Stoner Saunders, “Modern art was CIA 'weapon',” *The Independent*, 22 Oct 1995.

*The Wall*). This narrative can be found in cultural production as dissimilar as the ubiquity of paeans to idiosyncratic selfhood via autobiographical overlay in top 40 pop,<sup>7</sup> the persistent injunction to “keep it real,”<sup>8</sup> and, say, the discography of GG Allin and The Murder Junkies, an exemplary case of punk music at its most misanthropic, whose output includes the albums *Hated in the Nation* and *Eat my Fuc* (sic). In each instance, a personal authenticity is delineated as against mass culture. The speaker stakes out individuality by recourse to declaration of personal experience; commands to expunge the “unreal” (suggesting both that the speaker can discern the real from the unreal and that the unreal is something that must be kept at bay); and general anti-sociality and *ressentiment*. Ashlee Simpson’s “I Am Me” is then commensurate in its generalized defiance to “Eat my Fuc.” Both proclaim from a space opened up by way of contrariety or differentiation between the speaker and the broader culture.

By the late 1960s, the fat cat mandarins of Madison Avenue -- those selfsame avatars of establishmentarianism that hippie culture understood to be decked out in horn-rimmed glasses, smelling of pomade and shoe polish, head bent in sacerdotal duty to bureaucratic domination of the roguish human spirit -- had begun to favour creativity over conformity and art over “science” in advertising. A 1966 handbook for copywriters at Young & Rubicam advises its readers that “the first rule for copywriters is to be suspicious of rules. Rules have a way of turning into ruts” (qtd in Frank, 1998). An inflexible sales strategy makes for bad entrepreneurship; capital admits faster and greater

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Ashlee Simpson’s *I Am Me*, Geffen, 2005; Lady Gaga’s *Born this Way*, Interscope, 2011; Demi Lovato’s “This is Me,” *Camp Rock*, Disney, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> This directive is endemic to hip-hop. Consequently, it has seeped into milieus where it sounds absolutely ridiculous. See “Keep It Real” by The Jonas Brothers (from *Lines, Vines and Trying Times*, Hollywood, 2009), a manufactured boy-band that constitutes the Disney corporation’s latest update of The Monkees.

orders of change than even the most pliable youth market segment. Nineteen sixty-six was the same year that bigwig advertising writer Nicholas Samstag wrote an article for industry favorite, *Madison Avenue* magazine, titled “You Can’t Make a Good Advertisement out of Statistics,” wherein readers were apprised that

Marketing should be an emancipator. It should unlock locks and cut bonds by suggesting and implying, by hinting and beckoning, not defining. It should be the agent that frees, not the agent that imprisons... In brief, we need more and more affirmative, plastic, humanistic, refreshing research, less and less scientific authoritarianism... Forward researchers! *You have nothing to lose but your dogma.* (qtd in Frank, 1998)

Invoking no less a document than Marx and Engel’s *Communist Manifesto*, Samstag immolates the fiction of starched-shirt postwar suburban company man, if such a creature ever really existed in the guise in which we understand him (what was the soaring tailfin -- growing ever longer with each new model -- of 1950s cars if not a mark of a driver’s distinction?). But perhaps the most telling industry document was the paper titled, “Conform with the Non-Conformists.” Written by J. Walter Thompson executive Bev Corbin, it flagrantly encouraged admen to do things “differently” (qtd in Frank, 1998). This coming from the selfsame company that would go on to advertise 7-Up as the “Uncola:” the unique soft-drink that could liberate the consumer from the tyranny of status quo colas.

## **B. Invidious Comparison: I Do Want What I Haven't Got**

Mass culture was, by the late 1960s, a collective yearning for individualism obscured by the unceasingly popular narrative that society is actually comprised of a bunch of drones. This despite the fact that individuation is enshrined in economic individualism and its corollaries and cognates, such as Romanticism, protestantism, and liberalism. Hindsight is, as they say, 20/20, and so recent articles in the popular press that bemoan current fashion and pop-culture as derivative of earlier 20th century cultural expression,<sup>9</sup> transpose the lament of the individual languishing in mass culture to a complaint which perceives fashion trends as lending vigor and health to culture itself, thereby disclosing the veneration afforded to competitive expressions of individualism. Indeed, the cultural pleonasm that attends the idea of individualism which, post-Mill, vehemently insists that happiness is consanguine with liberty, freedom, and individual sovereignty -- as if happiness cannot be found in other social arrangements -- testifies to the powerful ubiquity and valorization of individualism. This ubiquity suggests a forest-for-the-trees cultural myopia.

Tellingly, individualism, although relegated to the den by popular culture, like an inebriated uncle at a Christmas party, is simultaneously identified as both highly elusive and a necessary component of contentment. Just like dear uncle Jim when he gets into his cups, individualism is nowhere and everywhere. Although this ubiquity would seem to

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<sup>9</sup> See "U.S. Dept. Of Retro Warns: 'We May Be Running Out Of Past'" *The Onion*. 4 November 1997 and "From Fashion To Housewares, Are We In A Decades-Long Design Rut?" Anderson, Kurt. *Vanity Fair*. January, 2012. This second article laments cultural nostalgia and, remarkably, seems to suggest that the lack of the "new" stems from technological development monopolizing creative production. There is, in this understanding, only so much creativity in the world and technological development is taking too great a slice of the productivity pie.

For a considered exploration of recycled popular cultural tropes, see Simon Reynolds' *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*. New York: Faber, 2011.

attest to its presence in everyone's lives, because its presence is phantasmal, it instead indicates a lack. It is presented as a substance to fill a void. A great and important void. It is *the* key to human flourishing, if the overzealousness with which it is mobilized in contemporary advertising is anything to go by (the nebulous injunction, "be yourself," a cursory internet search reveals, underpins a Nike Women's ad campaign; various pop songs -- by the likes of Audioslave and Graham Nash --; two record labels; a popular sticker celebrating the Oscar Wilde quote, which includes the addendum, "everyone else is already taken;" a popular clothing store; a customizable shoe; and an advertising campaign for Subway sandwiches). Individualism is, on the one hand, that most rare and fleeting elixir that only messiahs, billionaires, action-movie heroes and rock stars have imbibed, while on the other, that which animates our consumer choices, sense of self and the good life and undergirds our orientation in the world (rare is the person that would violently assert that their comportment and life decisions are all fastidiously derivative).

There are, however, socially destructive possibilities lurking behind a primacy afforded to individualism. Or rather, in what "individualism" has come to connote.<sup>10</sup> Generally speaking, individualism is most often portrayed and understood to be more about personal panache than it is about individual flourishing and the complicated integration of one's individual will with the general will (i.e., rule of law). Individualism, when in the guise of status-seeking, as with the social one-up-manship of "keeping up with the Joneses," marks individuality through consumer goods and/or behaviours. This can have disastrous results. Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, written in

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<sup>10</sup> See Chapter 2

1899, discusses this type of behaviour and, presciently, determines that envy-inducing distinction of social worth and merit, as established by what Veblen terms “invidious comparison,” is one of the drivers of consumer capitalism. Veblen’s analysis is noteworthy in its explanatory power of both the vernacular understanding of modern individualism -- as comprising élan and verve that one possesses in advance of one’s neighbours -- and in the relational positioning of its framework. For the canons of taste that determine preference can as easily refer to fox hunting, a penchant for polo, or a conversational comprehension of abstruse contemporary art (or, indeed, the desire to create such works or write or lecture on them!). The use of “Leisure Class” in Veblen’s title misdirects the reader; the work does not simply explore the predilections of the late 19th century *haut monde*. As Joseph Heath notes, “Veblen must not be understood merely as a critic of an obsolete ‘aristocratic’ pattern of upper-class consumption, but rather as the progenitor of a general theory of the relationship between class, status, private property, and social inequality” (Heath, *Veblen* 3).

Veblen’s analysis is integral to much of the popular understanding of consumerism as a social vice. Indeed, it was Veblen who turned the phrase, “conspicuous consumption.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, perceiving “conspicuous consumption” as being the reproof it is generally shorthand for -- i.e., an indictment of purchasing too much to satiate a vainglorious appetite -- is an incorrect gloss on his theory. His is not a moralizing critique, despite the frequent viciousness of his darkly sardonic tone. He does not bemoan

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<sup>11</sup> Although he uses the term conspicuous “leisure” far more frequently than “consumption,” due to the fact that the latter is a marquee of the former -- because those who cannot truly partake of leisure merely display indicators of leisure in order to telegraph possession thereof -- it was the latter term that was to become popular (which was appropriate, given that such phenomena lent credence to Veblen’s analysis).

the act of consumption, nor the desirability of leisure. Such acts are understood to serve the deeply human proclivities which underwrite consumptive and (un)productive behaviours in the first place; both have utility for their individual practitioners or possessors (67). His caustic scorn has a different target: the collectively self-defeating mechanism of status-hierarchy. Central to this claim is Veblen's mobilization of the word "invidious," which he

[uses] in a technical sense [so as to describe] a comparison of persons with a view to rating and grading them in respect of relative worth or value [...]

An invidious comparison is a process of valuation of persons in respect of worth. (Veblen, *Leisure* 25)

By engendering "emulative consumption" (*passim*), Veblen's invidious comparison lays bare the problem posed by prestige and distinction that is oftentimes obscured beneath the obstinate myth of the hypnotized consumer. The fact that distaste for mindless consumerism of this type is often articulated as "conspicuous consumption" -- as when used, for example, to refer to the actions of a fake-'n'-baked young urban professional cruising a convertible down a main drag -- is, as noted above, an ironic inversion of Veblen's analysis. Moreover, the conversational sense of the phrase overshoots what it attempts to aim at -- the word *conspicuous* alerts us to the fact that the consumption in question is deliberate and calculated on the part of the consumer. Nonetheless, the colloquial deployment of the allegation of "conspicuous consumption" insists that its practitioners are subordinate sheep. Bolstering this notion is a species of criticism, which

Joseph Heath calls “The Ideology Critique” (*Structure*, 3-4), that can be traced to Vance Packard’s highly influential exposé of the advertising industry, *The Hidden Persuaders*.

Published in the 1950s, Packard’s book, which revealed the sinister use of “scientific” techniques in the advertising industry, left a long shadow. Its effect can still be felt:

It is difficult to overstate the influence of Packard’s book. A best-seller, the book inspired a still-thriving faith in high-tech advertising trickery [...]

The Problem with advertising, *The Hidden Persuaders* taught, was that it was overly manipulative, that it opposed and even subverted “man in his long struggle to become a rational and self-guiding being,” that it sought to transform us into a nation of robot consumers like “Pavlov’s conditioned dog” [...]. (Frank 41)

There can be no doubt, of course, that advertising is not, generally-speaking, beneficial to the social fabric. In *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, Randal Marlin succinctly summarizes the types of harms belonging to the creation of advertisements:

[When a product is predictably harmful and advertising increases consumption of said product, the advertiser must share responsibility for harms effected]. Thus, one category of harms, and hence of ethical issues, relates to the product itself. A second category relates to the means used to sell a product. Such means may involve deliberate deception; exploitation of women; the presentation of a false social picture, demeaning to certain minorities; or the promotion of a lifestyle not widely sustainable in the

light of environmental concerns. The means may also be immediately offensive through noise, visual pollution of the landscape or cityscape and the like. (177)

This overview of mischief or injury resultant from advertising, while not perfect, is fairly exhaustive and, significantly, avoids making the grandiose claims of Packard's.

Advertising may be socially destructive, but this does not make it a svengali of such formidable talents as would be needed to manipulate such vast swaths of society. As Heath notes, it strains credulity to imagine that multitudes of reflexive agents are all behaving irrationally:

Positing widespread irrationality and error as an explanation for organized or systematic behaviour patterns tends to suggest a failure of interpretation on the part of the theorist, not a rationality deficit on the part of the actors. [...] ... the attempt to explain consumerism as some sort of massive collective delusion is often a self-defeating theoretical strategy, since the ascription of irrationality to agents counts as *prima facie* evidence against any such theory that draws support from such an ascription. (*Structure 4*)

It is remarkable how Packard's perception of advertising coheres with the late 60s' connotation of 'The Man.' It is therefore worth noting again that, while everyone was, in aggregate, bamboozled by that infernal fiend, at an individual level it was difficult to find The Man's cat's-paws. This situation puts to mind the droll story of the ancient kingdom, the harvest of which was determined to be poisoned. Those who ate of it became insane. "There is but one thing to do," said the King, "we must eat the grain to survive, but there

must be those among us who will remember that we are insane." If everyone in the 60s counterculture could discern the sinister touch of The Man amongst their colleagues and comrades, one wonders if they themselves might have been similarly contaminated. If so, it would have been decorous to remember that such a thing had occurred so as to foster greater solidarity and unanimity (especially given that belonging to countercultural bohemia was already premised on a fellowship of cultural resistance and repudiation of "The System"). Surely it's unfair to presume that *all* the arrivistes who bought their tie-dyes from department stores were frauds. The point being, of course, that once properly credentialed, no one remembers ever having sullied themselves with something as crass as department stores in the first instance. Rebirth as artiste, beat, punk, greaser, cultural critic or what-have-you is autogenous and eternal. No one recognizes the behaviour of the false selves of previous lives. Prior to the remarkable transcendence of Ideology is embarrassing naivety and bad year-book photos.

In "The Death of the Hipster," an article in *What was the Hipster? A Sociological Investigation*, published by the decidedly hip, literary magazine, *n+1*, Rob Horning muses on potential reasons as to why contemporary hipsterism is always denied at the individual level (i.e., the term "hipster" is always defined as "not me"):

One must start with the premise that the hipster is defined by a lack of authenticity, by a sense of lateness to the scene, or by the fact that his arrival fashions the scene -- transforms people who are doing their thing into a self-conscious scene, something others can scrutinize and exploit. The hipster is that person who shows up and seems to ruin things -- then

you can begin to ask why this person exists, whether he is inevitable, whether he can be stopped and what it will take. The hipster's presence specifically forms the illusion of inside and outside, and the idea that others will pay for the privilege of being shown through the gate. (82)

The parvenus, of which more later, is the figure whom everyone loathes. It is s/he that exposes the arbitrary nature of seemingly "genuine" social protocol. Heath, discussing the rules governing Veblenian status hierarchy, notes that

newer members of a social class tend to be acting out, quite consciously, a script that older members of the class have long ago internalized [...]. The *arriviste* or the *nouveau riche* are often accused of vulgarity. Yet often the problem is not that they are doing anything *wrong*; it's that they are doing it all too *consciously*. This leaves more entrenched members of the class feeling exposed, because it reveals the artifice underlying what they prefer to regard as a purely natural form of behaviour. (What Bourdieu calls "the ideology of natural taste" has correlates within all of these hierarchies from "the ideology of good breeding" to "the ideology of natural cool.").

(Heath, *Veblen* 19)

The arriviste, as with those who have come before her, is doing nothing intrinsically inapt or unreasonable. If we are charitable for a moment, we can concede that we might behave (or have already behaved) precisely as she does. The problem is that the late arrival signals that the ever-recurring cycle of competition is set to begin anew. As Veblen writes, "[A]s fast as a person makes new acquisitions, and becomes accustomed to the resulting

new standard of wealth, the new standard forthwith ceases to afford appreciably greater satisfaction than the earlier standard did" (*Leisure*, 23). Furthermore, this cycle of expenditure of time and energy only begets fresh expenditure -- it must, by its very nature, demand constant outlay. It cannot attain equilibrium:

...The desire for wealth can scarcely be satiated in any individual instance, and evidently a satiation of the average or general desire for wealth is out of the question. However widely, or equally, or "fairly", it may be distributed, no general increase of the community's wealth can make any approach to satiating this need, the ground of which is the desire of every one to excel every one else in the accumulation of goods. If, as is sometimes assumed, the incentive to accumulation were the want of subsistence or of physical comfort, then the aggregate economic wants of a community might conceivably be satisfied at some point in the advance of industrial efficiency; but since the struggle is substantially a race for reputability on the basis of an invidious comparison, no approach to a definitive attainment is possible. (*Leisure*, 25 - 26)

This is the collectively self-defeating scenario that Veblen decries as "wasteful." It must be noted, however, that, again, he does not indict the individual's actions as wasteful. Rather, it is the activities and signals of the leisure class -- activities and signals that are emulated within and across classes -- resultant from invidious comparison, that is wasteful. How, one might reasonably wonder, did we arrive at such a collectively injurious situation? Here, to make better sense of his theory, we must consider Veblen's

model of the two instincts -- the proclivities of “workmanship” and predation -- that drive human nature. However, before doing so, it is important to recognize a presence that can no longer be overlooked. Discussion of the waste of the leisure class telegraphs a distinct confabulation; it signals a discussion in the jurisdiction of “consumerism.” Marx’s model of commodity fetishism will be addressed in the next chapter, but as his inhabitation of any discourse on consumerism<sup>12</sup> is indisputable, a brief discussion of Veblen and Marx seems prudent.

The relationship between Marx and Veblen’s theories are held by many to be a vexed one. As Edgell and Townshend note, there exists a body of literature, emerging almost as early as Veblen’s own writings, that consists of commentators attesting to both the compatibility and incongruity of the two economist’s works (1993). I do not have the space to trace the contours of such a debate. Instead, I would like to quickly point to the useful consideration provided by Kirsten Ford and William McCulloch that enables a fruitful positioning of messrs Marx and Veblen, whereby collusion and agreement replace potential rancour and dissension. Namely, that a correlation can be drawn between the two if attention is paid to their points of departure. The congruity there revealed will underscore Marx and Veblen’s shared perception of the “nature of economic life” and demonstrate that “many of their conclusions regarding the operation of modern capitalism may ultimately be reconciled” (Ford & McCulloch 1-2).

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that Marxist critique coheres well with “anti-consumerist” critique. Much of what constitutes anticonsumerist literature, especially on the far left in such currents as anarcho-primitivism, is hostile to progress in production, particularly when it desires a return to agricultural parochialism (see, for example, the work of John Zerzan or Derrick Jensen). But these are precisely the conditions that the capitalist mode of production liberates us from. Marx calls this type of critique “reactionary socialism” (Marx & Engels 245-46). Nonetheless, commodity fetishism is central to the main currents of cultural criticism in the 20th century -- the Frankfurt school and Debord being the most obvious examples -- and so Marx has undeniably been imputed into disputations in the anti-consumerist canon.

Marx and Veblen's rapprochement begins with a rejection of the standard misapprehension of Marx's dialectical materialism as teleological, a blunder perpetrated by Veblen in one of his scarce disparagements of Marx, wherein he condemns Marxist analysis as, in contrast with his own analysis, "pre-Darwinian," and expectant of a "definitive equilibrium" (Veblen, *Followers* 596). The perception of Marxist critique as simple economic determinism<sup>13</sup> (often referred to, amongst Marxists themselves as "vulgar Marxism" (Eagleton, *Marxism*, viii)), is one that can largely be traced to Engels' (somewhat reductive) popularization of Marx in *Anti-Dühring*. But Marx did not see human activity as purely passive. The revolutionary subject, rather, was history's *midwife*. As Ford and McCulloch note, "for Marx, humankind's objective freedom is constituted by the very lack of a singular teleological project in history. Human history is teleological only in the sense that it is a progressive realization of human essence; an essence which Marx (concurrent with Veblen) does not define *a priori* as either "good" or "bad" (8).

Both Veblen and Marx are sensitive to the veiled relations of production: the social conflict and alienation belonging to capitalist modernity. Whatever differences between the two instanced in allegations as to Marxist teleology are immaterial in the face of the similarities shared. Ford and McCulloch draw attention to both economist's "mediated starting points" to underscore the contention that both Marxist and Veblenian

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<sup>13</sup> Teleology in Marx is a controversial topic, the extent of which far exceeds anything more than a cursory mention here. While it is true that Marxist analysis anticipates the world-historical proletarian transcendence of capitalist productive and property relations (i.e., a determinant historical vision), it is not true that this is a claim to a final end of history. And indeed, our historical moment, conspicuously devoid of any prevalent socialism, demands that some attention be paid to the problems in Marx resulting from the need to sidestep "writing recipes for kitchens of the future." This matter is painstakingly taken up in G. A. Cohen's *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

analysis springs from an underlying essentialism<sup>14</sup> (this, of course, being the feature in Marx problematized by many post-Althusserian readings) that allows for an appreciation of the distorted nature of economic life under capitalist modernity. This is necessary to avoid the trap of classical political economy (and neo-classical economics), which, unable to distinguish between essence and historical existence, mystifies and excuses existing social conditions: “In failing to perceive anything beyond the existence of historically specific institutions like private property, lines of inquiry remain wedged where they should begin, amounting to an apologia for existent class relations” (Ford and McCulloch 11).

Where Marx’s famous analysis of capitalism proceeds from an examination of its most basic unit, the commodity (see chapter 2), Veblen’s analysis proceeds from the vantage point of business and leisure. As Robert Heilbroner notes of Veblen, “[his inquiry began with] the whole set of customs and mores which resulted in that particular kind of play called ‘the business system.’ [...] [He] delved into the nature of economic man and his economic rites and rituals [...] [and scrutinized the] economic psychopathology of our daily lives [...] [In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* his interest lay] in such questions as What is the nature of economic man? How does it happen that he so builds his community that it will have a leisure class? What is the economic meaning of leisure itself?” ( 221, 230). It is by virtue of Marx and Veblen’s respective starting points within

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<sup>14</sup> Ford and McCulloch appear to be mobilizing “essentialism” in a humanist sense, whereby essence points to humankind’s “nature.” Of course, even the young Marx did not refer to human essence as an eternal, abstract object. Rather, the “essence” or “species being” that Marx and Veblen are here applauded for employing is more an ever-changing plurality and/or potentiality that unfolds historically. This “essence” is exactly that which we are alienated from so long as material conditions distort our reality. See Marx’s “Theses on Feuerbach” in *The German Ideology*, pp 120 -123, and Eric Fromm’s *Marx’s Concept of Man*, pp 24 - 42, 69 - 79.

their respective historical moments -- “The ‘Business Man,’ as a principal expression of modern existence, plants Veblen’s inquiry solidly in the historically specific features of the present economic system, as does the commonplace commodity for Marx” (McColloch and Ford 13) -- that both are able to reveal truths about the functioning of capitalism and its “failures to produce conditions favorable to essential human life” (*ibid.*). The mediated starting points of both enable a penetrating view of the functioning of capitalism without the “obfuscation that comes from universalizing the particular” (*ibid.*). From these vantage points and as “essentialists,” both are able to discern the problems inhering in social relations: “[the priority paid to] the interrelatedness of modern production (itself made visible by way of chosen presupposition through which to navigate the specific nature of economic life) brings out from under the coverings of its universalization the “hidden” nature of ownership. Accordingly, both conclude that on the condition that the present system of ownership persists, human beings are blocked from living in a system more fully in accord with their essential nature” (Ford & McColloch 17). The take away point here, insofar as it relates to the broader issues at play in this paper, is that the view that Veblen can complement Marx and vice versa is not inappropriate or fallacious. For our purposes, the significance of this is most pertinent in the fruitful tension between the two in explicating social controls and the continuity of an exploitative status quo. Veblen’s theory of status competition places the notion of emulation where Marxist scholarship has often placed theories of hegemony.

I would like to now quickly return to Veblen's use of the terms "instinct of workmanship" and "predatory instinct" so as to give a clearer picture of how invidious comparison foments status hierarchy. Veblen believes that social behaviour is determined by these two fundamental instincts. The instinct of workmanship is the consequence of humankind's ceaseless activity. This activity is "unfolding and impulsive," but also instrumental or "teleological" (Veblen, *Leisure* 12). That is, human action is always aimed toward some end; it has an objective. Over time, this tendency results in an appreciation of the most efficient means of realizing ends: "[a human agent] is possessed of a taste for effective work, and a distaste for futile effort. He has a sense of the merit of serviceability or efficiency and of the demerit of futility, waste, or incapacity (Veblen, *Leisure* 13). Veblen, in his references to the differences between tribes and communities of "primitive savages," allows that this valuation of instrumentality is culturally contingent, and a case could perhaps be made that the notion of the "instinct of workmanship,"<sup>15</sup> holding, as it does, skill and efficiency in high esteem, is itself an appraisal borne of a cultural regard for pragmatic rationality. Nonetheless, Veblen's point stands: those acts that assist in the collective goal of survival are, over time, venerated. They require skill and these skills come to be admired. Concomitant to admiration for skillful work is disdain for wastefulness and uselessness.

Conversely, the "predatory instinct," a proclivity or behaviour manifest in social life, is an expression of exploitation or prowess, rather than industry or diligence (Veblen, *Leisure* 10). A predatory culture emerges from one of non-invidious workmanship and

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<sup>15</sup> Jim McGuigan contends that Veblen's work contains a tension in capitalist culture between the old, protestant work ethic and an "emerging hedonism pioneered by the rich and emulated increasingly throughout the twentieth century by the lower orders" (*Cool* 88).

sets the stage for class-based culture (Veblen, *Leisure* 147 - 148). A hunter-gatherer society may well have differentials in abilities and capacities for workmanship -- some individuals will likely have greater aptitudes for given tasks, say, hunting, fishing, carving, etc -- and may be treated accordingly with honorifics and the like. Once the struggle against environmental dangers is instead turned inward to human-on-human relations, a culture transforms into one where predation is the rule of the day and status hierarchy becomes a hierarchy of dominance (Veblen, *Leisure* 147). The result, of course, is division of labour along gender lines and the concept of property extending beyond simple personal belongings, exhibited in patriarchal domination and “ownership” of women (Veblen, *Leisure* 38, 48 - 49).

Once a culture has sufficient economic surplus to ensure the persistence of predatory social relations, an unambiguous class structure emerges. Because the upper classes, by virtue of their owning the means of production, simply appropriate the wealth they need, they are able to abstain from work and so become the “leisure” class. Indeed, they are not only exempt from labour, they are prohibited from “industrial” toil (Veblen, *Leisure* 4). But “leisure” is a misnomer. And here is where the perspicacity of Veblen’s analysis come to light. Counter to the sloth and luxuriating one would expect a life of affluence and prosperity to elicit, the rich are often incredibly busy people. This is because the instinct of workmanship is never properly vanquished, but rather is transposed so as to underlie invidious distinction. A peculiar inversion of values is here effected and uselessness becomes celebrated *because* it signifies leisure (Veblen *Leisure*, 94, 96, 125). The predatory class, set apart from the labouring classes, has fewer and

fewer opportunities to display its prowess. The result is the invented labour-intensive activities and the accumulation of honorific objects, accoutrements, artifacts of the upper classes. Bizarrely, the activities of the rich, though requiring great exertion and skill, must, in order to demarcate between the activities of the lower classes, be unambiguously useless. Conspicuous waste is thus like a vestigial tail: it is the lingering workmanship instinct of the predatory class. Veblen is quick to point out that such activities are not a result of laziness and often characterizes conspicuous leisure as *performance* (45, 56, 99, *et passim*), a characterization that has caustic resonances with many behaviours in contemporary demographics of the cultural vanguard and with species of criticism which attempt to rehabilitate the salacious and reconstruct hedonic transgression as political and/or significant cultural resistance.

Where Veblen discusses many of the behaviours contemporaneous to his analysis as examples of conspicuous leisure -- manners, classical languages, aesthetic discernment, etc (*Leisure* 34) -- it is not difficult to see the direct progeny of these behaviours in contemporary phenomena like fixed-gear bikes; facility with canons of obscure art and music; gauges, plugs and flesh tunnels; anti-consumerist sentiment; localvore diets,<sup>16</sup> etc. This points to an aspect of conspicuous leisure that has changed dramatically since Veblen's time, no doubt due to the consumer revolution in the first part of the twentieth century and the relative plentitude of the post war global north. In place of aristocratic leisure, we have bourgeois conspicuous consumption, which today

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<sup>16</sup> HBO's *Bored to Death* waggishly illustrates the prevalence of the localvore trend. Demonstrating that it is hardly the exclusive domain of bohemian dumpster-divers, "We Could Sing a Duet," from season 3, depicts the conflict between two New York restaurateurs whose rivalry reaches a fever-pitch when the second claims to source his food from 50-miles outside the city, undercutting by half the first restaurateur's claim of sourcing from a measly 100 miles out from Manhattan's urban center.

oftentimes takes the form of nonconformity and hip alterity. Veblen is correct that emulative consumption is a cross class phenomenon, but where his model appears to move from top to bottom, a peculiar side-effect of the search for “nonconformity” is a tendency to purloin from the working classes. Alterity is as much heterodox cool as it is blue collar orthodoxy (think liberty spikes in working class jeans, lanky musicians sporting lumberjack beards, sunglasses and trucker ballcaps, etc.). Conspicuous emulation seems, in this light, to percolate upwards. It is surely true that working class totems telegraph an unvarnished simplicity and sincerity and it is telling that these characteristics should receive such high regard. What this seems to suggest is a desire for the evasive specter of the highly sought-after, storied and nebulous *authentic*.

### **C. Framed by the Liberal Public Sphere: Transgression and Authenticity**

The foregoing has stressed as a certainty that overzealous commitment to singularity, in aggregate, quickly becomes a race to the bottom scenario. But what might this scenario actually look like? As with the joke about the island of people whose esteem in the community is predicated on how immoderate their behaviour and adornment, it does not take long for things to get out of control. The population of this joke’s island environment consist of a rather doleful group and their sensibilities in dress run toward dark colours, piercing, and body modification. Saturnine celebrations held with a regular frequency allow island denizens to preen and strut in front of their fellow islanders. Their frippery, naturally, becomes ever more extreme, as each attempts to out do one another’s celebration of lugubriousness. It is not long before aureate tattooing, scarification and

branding gave way to cutting off the skin of one's face in rectangle shapes, the base of which is left intact. This allows for the strip of the skin that has covered the rectangle to be rolled back, much like the tin on a sardine can, and fastened to the remaining epidermis. This revealing of the dermis and, where the cutting runs deep enough, bits of subcutis flesh, enables the exposure of greater views of the musculature on one's face. Moreover, it surely gives solemn testimony to the resolve of its practitioners; one does not easily second-guess the funereal sincerity of a compatriot willing to cut off parts of her or his own face in the name of Young Wertherianism, the sublime beauty of impermanence, the dark mysteries of the lunar cycle, or what have you.

As you've likely guessed, there is no such joke, but maybe there should be, even if it's not even half-way amusing as gallows humour. I've just re-told the story of certain strains of goth and/or BDSM manner and custom in a reductive, but arguably apt, fashion. To see pictures of people peeling their own skin off for social functions, a behaviour which does, in fact, exist in the manner I have described, I suggest you find a copy of 90s and early aughts magazine, *Torture Garden*. This bad faux joke does two things. It illustrates the problematic effects of competition in idiosyncrasy; that is, how easily status seeking can lead to a collective action problem -- the further a gesture of authenticity is, quite reasonably,<sup>17</sup> pushed by an individual, the further the goal posts of what gestures will past mustard are extended for the group. Furthermore, this face-cutting thought experiment opens the door to considerations of what is and is not considered

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<sup>17</sup> Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter have written extensively on how Veblenian invidious comparison is a socially destructive zero-sum game. As I have mentioned, Veblen himself stresses that invidious competition is a rational behaviour from the standpoint of the individual. Heath and Potter underline this further with the term "defensive consumption:" the need to keep up with the Joneses is not simply the reserve of intentional status seeking and the predatory classes, it is the plight of anyone who does not want to undergo the humiliation of falling behind the current or zeitgeist of their demographic profile (115).

beyond the pale in the liberal public sphere. It points to a discussion of what belongs to public and private selves and spaces. These are items I will return to frequently, often framed using coordinates coined by John Durham Peters in *Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition*. Durham Peters' notion of "abyss-artists" and "abyss-redeemers" informs many of my forthcoming musings on authenticity. To see the manner in which he deploys such terms, it is necessary to step back and take another look at what is represented by face-cutters I have just evoked.

Communities which flagrantly defy convention exist, of course, in non-caricatured, deadly serious fashion. Whether Pentecostal snake-handlers, Norwegian Black Metal enthusiasts, modern primitives or the aforementioned goth communities, enclaves which stake out identity via markers of difference are legion. But whether or not their mobilization of difference is a result of religious or secular inclination and conviction, it is difficult to not see how Veblenian sociality is operative. I am less concerned, of course, with those instances of difference that rest upon religious ritual -- where asociality is more an accidental byproduct of a gesture of faith -- than with knowing or intentional instances of oppositional activities. As Judith Butler has famously written of the performativity of drag-queens, opposition to constructions of power must source its power on the selfsame constructions it wishes to subvert (123). Because one cannot step outside of social relations, the act of resistance must re-inscribe the cultural norms it seeks to resist; the resultant space of ambivalence, of inversion, of irony, is one of agency. This argument is compelling and it is easy to see it instanced in "lifestyle" politics. However, the problem posed by invidious comparison surely persists. And if the

mechanism whereby difference is instantiated is itself a result of Veblenian predation and culminates, ultimately, as a zero-sum game *within* the communities where it is operative,<sup>18</sup> both its efficacy and headsprings or origination demand examination.

Surely Butler's insight is correct: the selfsame social norms which are resisted in oppositional performativity (or the creation of a subversive or incendiary social act or object) form the outer bounds from which resistance *can* be marshaled. Outside of the context of dominant governmentalization (or whatever term one prefers to point to the phenomenon of subject formation), even oppositional behaviour becomes incoherent. But what does it mean when resistance or subversion *itself* instances a continuation of oppression and socially pernicious behaviour? And what can be said of the act of explaining, justifying, translating the value of the result of such behaviour (as in the role of the critic)? Does the critic's act of explication and exposition itself instance a case of invidious comparison (via the cultural capital that criticism confers on its exponent)? And what are the constellations from which this arrangement emerges? What is the *ballast* that is desirable in this coordinate system? If the benefits of oppositional performativity are obvious in the case of Butler's example of drag culture, perhaps it is better to examine instances where the manner of subverting cultural domination is so extreme that it is conceivably *worse* than the re-inscription of the coordinates of oppression, subordination and emancipation that always-already attend acts of resistance.

The works of the Viennese Actionists, that cohort of European performance artists making works throughout the 1960s and into the 70s, consisted of staged events --

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<sup>18</sup> To say nothing of the fodder it provides for the reproduction of invidious comparison amongst multiple strata of class hierarchy.

“actions” -- which relished the profane. Violence, destruction, nudity, fluids were their hallmark; from vomit to shit, flagellation to sodomy, if it was something coded as “debased” by dominant culture, chances are the Viennese Actionists made it happen for a viewing public.<sup>19</sup> Two things immediately impress themselves on the mind of someone considering such antics: 1) The question of production: What are the cultural coordinates in which such works emerge; what gives rise to the manner of their production? And 2) The manner of reception: Is the viewer offended? Disgusted? Saddened? What is the appropriate response? How is it that the viewer is oftentimes convinced of such works’ value?

Writing of an episode of “erotic vomiting” -- a performance art piece recounted by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (2002) -- Durham Peters notes

If the audience is shocked [...], that reaction only serves to as evidence of how deep its complicities go [...] and the degree to which apparently spontaneous feelings of pity or disgust are already facts of power. Warner can bank on on an academic audience thinking it is bad form to look uptight in public; “prude” is nearly as bad a thing in culturally liberal spheres as “Nazi” or “racist,” since it implies not only a moral deficiency but weakness in taste. The first person caught holding his or her nose loses. If you feel grossed out, then perhaps you ought to reflect on whether your compunctions are complicit with oppression. Guilt makes liberals enablers. Abyss-artists practice a leading kind of moral suspension:

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<sup>19</sup> A good round up of their videos, for the (morbidly) curious can be found at Ubuweb: [www.ubu.com/film/vienna\\_actionists.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/vienna_actionists.html)

refusing to pass judgment and operating, perhaps, like Warner's performer's, just "at the threshold of gagging." (90)

Durham Peters' "Abyss-artist" is that character who does not shrink from the void and, indeed, is happy to plumb its depths for the secrets contained therein. As Peters' puts it, "to know madness and folly is the business of abyss-artistry, whose modern form enjoys the added aura of Promethean rebellion or Faustian striving. The "black writers of the bourgeoisie," as [Horkheimer and Adorno] called Machiavelli, Sade, Nietzsche, and the like, were all engaged in teaching an *amor intellectualis diaboli* as the counterpart to (and hidden truth of) Enlightenment reason" (85 - 86). The abyss-artist is s/he who unveils the repressed secrets of life that are shunted to the closet or are held in check by the superego; theirs is a world where ethics are suspended in the name of higher truths, catharsis and the productive forces of transgression.<sup>20</sup> But the abyss-artist is in need of collaborators. Given that even the most graphic, uncensored -- explicit -- art is *implicit* in its communication with the world (i.e, its viewer), it requires translation (particularly translation of its worth or value, i.e., explication coincident with pointers as to how it might be read). Art and action, and especially art that consists of action, as with our Viennese Actionists, is vague. Its signification is palpably open-ended. As Peters' notes, if Jonathan Swift had decided that *A Modest Proposal* might have been improved by fidelity to its actual content and so dubbed it *An Ironic Proposal*, its success would have been spoiled (91). Irony is perhaps the most illustrative mode of the abyss-artist: oblique articulations of the wink-wink, nudge-nudge variety. "Can you believe I'm doing this?"

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<sup>20</sup> Abyss-artistry is thus a cognate for my working interpretation of alterity and alternative media.

the performer seems to ask her viewer. Unequivocal communication neuters irony, ambiguity and imprecision, the victuals of abyss-artistry. This is why abyss-artists need their redeemers; they require this symbiotic relationship in order that their works be disseminated *and understood as worthy of the public sphere*. The abyss-redeemer fashions the “warning label, the clarifying caption, the moral commentary that tries to salvage and justify the excursion into the abyss” (Durham Peters 87).

This arrangement constitutes the means by which much art is decoded, interpreted: “The relations between [...] artists and redeemers involves a curious division of communicative labor. [...] The irrational speaker aids the mental and moral exercise of the rational listener. The speaker’s outrageousness is supposed to stimulate the listener’s reasonableness. If the moderation of the listener were to infect the speaker or the certainty of the speaker were to infect the listener, the check-and-balance system would be upset” (Durham Peters 91). Irony, suggestion, deviousness, circumlocutions -- the palette of the *implicit* -- is located in the communication system itself, not in the communicating agent; left to their own devices, abyss-artists would exist in a cyclone of chaos and abyss-redeemers would become anemic (Durham Peters 92). To put it another way, the Body Art of Orlan<sup>21</sup> or the Chapman Brothers’ mannequins of naked children with penises for noses<sup>22</sup> could not exist outside of their historical moment. This seemingly pedestrian observation is not in reference to the matter of content, which of course cannot help but belong to the evolving canons of art historical aesthetics, or even

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<sup>21</sup> Orlan puts herself under the knife of plastic surgeons to interrogate registers of female beauty. Her remodeled face will be a composite of Venus, Diana, Europa, Psyche and Mona Lisa. See <[www.orlan.net](http://www.orlan.net)>

<sup>22</sup> See the Chapman Brothers’ piece, “Zygotic Acceleration, Biogenetic, De-Sublimated Libidinal Model” at <[litmed.med.nyu.edu/Annotation?action=view&annid=12886](http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/Annotation?action=view&annid=12886)>

form, which answers to the same demands. But running in tandem with aesthetic canons and prescripts are the mechanisms by which a work or gesture becomes comprehensible. The communicative mode of such works would likely register them as incoherent -- rather than *outré* or provocative -- outside of the modern coordinates to which they belong. What then are the features of this structure of communication that foster the arrangement of abyss-artist and -redeemer?

The liberal public sphere cherishes absolute freedom of expression. This is the badge it brandishes when its credentials as deputy of liberty are questioned. Perhaps it is an exclusionary space. Perhaps its abstracted character reduces its representations of active denizens to masculine and well-heeled persons of means; exactly those citizens whose social privilege fortifies them for the civic self-transcendence demanded by the bright glare of the open agora. But this is, we are told, the price that is to be paid for the rational and even-handed indifference of the public sphere. However, what if the expression contained within the public sphere is itself also a result of this selfsame faux inclusivity? In ““The Marketplace of Ideas: A History of a Concept,” John Durham Peters makes a good case for the *fait accompli* between “marketplace of ideas” and the public sphere. The former maps perfectly onto the seeming permissiveness of the public sphere, thus demonstrating that the ostensible meritocracy of objects and messages deployed within the circuits of liberal publicity is suspect (or simply predicated on the same old dreary and pernicious inequities fomented by liberal capitalism). The liberal tradition likens free speech with free enterprise, thereby bolstering the notion that any declaration or utterance can be appraised on its own merits and its price determined by

open and unfettered competition. But even free market advocates would be advised to take stock of this association. Peters observes of this correlation that “[it] sells short older visions of the human estate, for instance, the Aristotelian notion, refracted via Hegel, Marx and Dewey, that economic activity is basic to our species not as barter (exchange) but as the creativity of labor (production), or the Platonic-Christian belief that renunciation of both private acquisition and public agonism can be honorable” (Peters, *Marketplace* 80).

Seen in this light, abyss-redeemers may be acting as functionaries of commercial logics, lending value to abyss-artistry by way of explanations as to the worthiness of transgressive tonics and draughts. As when one claims of Viennese Actionism that its violence and moral turpitude does not exceed the horrors and unfreedoms of the world, perpetuated by the “externalized” inequity resultant from systemic accumulation by dispossession, inherent to the capitalist mode of production. Indeed, one might be tempted to say that the performances of the Viennese Actionists, with their flagrant and scabrous sexual and physical excesses, forcefully reiterate and reflect our complicity in violence, interwoven, literally, in the fabric of our clothing. We might be tempted to compose any number of hackneyed justifications and rationales, but where we might be tempted to say that, further, Viennese Actionism is too extreme, too vicious to be commodified and that this also plays to its covert genius, we would be mistaken. Too many abyss-redeemers have argued on its behalf in advance of these small considerations and Viennese Actionism is safely ensconced in the upper echelons of the art world, enjoying display at the likes of the TATE modern, the Museum Moderner Kunst

(MUMOK) and Vienna's Museum of Applied Arts (MAK).<sup>23</sup> The question then becomes, what is it about abyss-artistry that conscripts the ministrations of the abyss-redeemer? If we allow that there is an in-built tendency in liberal theory to equate toleration (celebration?) of trespass and heterodoxy with freedom, the actions of the abyss-redeemer is made transparent. But why *these* types of objects and performances? Why these modes of expression? It is surely not simply the act of transgression itself that ensures the attention of the abyss-redeemer. Why would a chat-room of unabashed libertines, relishing discussion of coprophilia or pedophilia or what have you, likely have no other defenders than the ACLU? Such an occurrence would not constitute abyss-artistry. And yet a short film or story *depicting* the discussions and travails of such individuals would likely attract a bevy of brave defenders (perhaps with wine glasses in hand and evening dress in full display).<sup>24</sup> Put another way, why would a clandestine meeting of the Red Army Faction count as little more than sedition and terrorist conspiracy, and yet a transcription of such a meeting could ostensibly be the talk of the town, if projected on a white wall, with attendant lighting, music, and helpful cues as to strategies of interpretation courtesy of the abyss-redemption disgorged by the speechifying and erudite discussion made by gallery patrons' very loud and important voices.

The liberal tradition has amongst its numerous antecedent conventions the distinction of private and public. This divide asserts itself in the rise of the political

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<sup>23</sup> See "Clean Up Your Act" *Frieze Magazine*, June-August 2004 and <[www.tate.org.uk](http://www.tate.org.uk)>

<sup>24</sup> This is a loaded question that, pursued doggedly, would evoke the age-old inquiry as to the human penchant for representation and art-making generally. This is obviously far beyond the reach of my paper. Further, the idea of transgressive art as aiding and abetting social *decoding* or *detritorialization* in its disruption of established codes of meaning or its functioning as homology for the instability and havoc of capitalism is, in some senses, merely diagrammatic. And I am here interested in trying to unearth an underlying "why" as to the *particular* allure of the *phrasing* or *form* of abyss-artistry.

*individual*. The modern conception of citizenry, as opposed to feudal self-definition belonging entirely to fixed, inherited social roles, sets the stage for constitutionalism and economic individualism. As Andrew Potter notes, “[the distinction] between positive law and custom, are creatures of that quintessential institution of modernity, the sovereign state. And once they are in place, they are able to evolve into their fully developed form, the liberal distinction between the public realm, which is within the law’s reach, and the private realm, which is a sphere of personal conscience, worship and pursuit” (34). But the idea that one must suspend personal predilection in the interest of the greater good, i.e., public communication, rests on the older, stoic notion of emotional detachment fostering the public good (Rist 263). This is because the public, i.e., community, is a place of instruction and teaching. Teaching succeeds best in arenas of disinterestedness and discipline (beneath a shadow of macho masochism, that trait of the public sphere which welcomes transgressive articulations in the interest of making the body politic more hale; “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” is the most basic claim of the free speech ideal). Laying the track for the liberal penchant for self-abstraction or transcendence in the name of public toleration, stoic conception of the public as open, indifferent and detached marks it in contrast with the personal as a site of interest, regard, arousal, passion. If the public sphere is aloof and phlegmatic, the private sphere is engaged and choleric.

This division reappears, in somewhat modified form, in the bugbear presented by self-consciousness, which can be traced to the Sermon on the Mount (Durham Peters 42). In Matthew 6:3, Jesus praises those deeds which are done free from self-regard (“let not

your right hand know what your left hand is doing”). Munificent deeds are sullied by an audience, even if it only is oneself who is doing the watching. In the Christian tradition, from which come conventions that colour western culture, whether secular or no, goodness cannot be in the awareness of its possessor, lest it become premeditated or a matter of theater and masquerade. The eye of the other *or* the self spoils “uninhibited authenticity” (Durham Peters 42):

For Christianity publicity corrupts [...]. Do good in the closet, says the Sermon on the Mount; let no one see but god. How are you supposed to act once you are conscious that it is better to act without self-consciousness? [...] Nothing shows the inner kinship of Christianity and Romanticism more clearly than the strange psychic oscillation between the joys of unconsciousness and in the inhibitions of self-reflection they share. (Durham Peters 43).

This further distinction between the purity of intention belonging to the unwitnessed act and the pitfalls attendant to public space and the problems arising from being surveilled further emphasize the character of what is nurtured and sustained by the private self as fervour, feeling, soul. Romanticism, which could pass as an entire *school* dedicated to abyss-artistry, held fast to this knowledge: “drugs, madness, infatuation, faith, and art above all are paths Romantics have trod in quest of divine self-forgetfulness” (Durham Peters 44) and, arguably, set the stage and established the template for modern oppositional production. Talk of extemporaneity and the “creative process” are awash with adjectives of approbation, such as “inspiration,” “originality,” and “ingenuity.” This

is not to say that they are not fitting or appropriate descriptions of creative productions, only that they signal the revelation at the heart of the esteemed part of the creative enterprise (not the dreary hours of practice and premeditated planning, nor the anxiety of influence; only the divine moment of execution is ever given regard). This is what is being communicated when artists interviewed in magazines and television discuss their work as being the result of auto-genesis: “I don’t know, man, it just comes to me” -- they are telegraphing the evasion of observance of their most secret (and creatively fecund) self.

It is possible, in my view, that it is these ineffable attributes -- of passion and spirit -- that are smuggled into the public sphere by way of abyss-artistry.<sup>25</sup> And it is like ambrosia to the abyss-redeemer. The dividing line between the tough-minded, detached professionalism of publicness and the *sincerity* or genuineness of the unobserved private self is best expressed in contemporary parlance as the authentic. And it is all the more pronounced if we associate the public sphere with its popular analogue of the market:

[To be self-conscious] about authenticity is self-defeating. Authenticity is like authority or charisma: if you have to tell people you have it, then you probably don’t. [Moreover] authenticity has an uneasy relationship with the market economy. This is because authenticity is supposed to be that which is spontaneous, natural, innocent and “unspun,” and for most people, the cash nexus is none of these. Markets are the very definition of

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<sup>25</sup> This characterization coheres somewhat with Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of *desiring-production* -- i.e., the productive force of the unconscious -- in that the unconscious seeping into the public sphere via abyss-artistry would account for the high value attached to it (even if representation is thought to be a site of repression or distortion) (Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 1-6, 109, 110).

that which is planned, fake, calculating, and marketed. That is, selling authenticity is another way of making it self-conscious, which is again, self-defeating. (Potter 114)

The abyss-artist, worker of materials excavated from authentic ore belonging to the private sphere, can shore up the credentials of the abyss-redeemer. It can supply her/him with considerable cultural capital, coincident with every critical insight and sagacious remark, with which to turboboost cycles of invidious comparison. The question of why one would desire a position in the creative economies, within the context of our historical moment (i.e., that of late capitalism) has been considered before, often negatively (see the epigram of this chapter). It should go without saying, that the *métier* of abyss-artist itself, raises the stocks of one's invidious distinction in such a way as to make tolerable the fact that the rent cheque keeps bouncing. But the value that has heretofore been referred to in this paper as cultural capital ought to be named *authenticity*. This is the coveted quality which undergirds the entire edifice of abyss-artistry and -redemption. And, as we will see in chapter 3, this fact has not gone unnoticed by capital and its apparatchiks.

In a spate of abyss-redemption, bordering on orgasmic, Terry Eagleton discusses the protagonist of Thomas Mann's re-telling of the *Faust* legend:

Adrian is a Dionysian artist, plumbing the depths of human wretchedness in order to pluck order from chaos. His art strives to wrest the spirit from the flesh, wholeness from affliction, the angelic from the demonic. If the artist seeks to redeem a corrupt world by the transfigurative power of his art, then he or she must be on intimate terms with evil. This is why the

modern artist is the secular version of Christ, who descends into the hell of despair or destruction in order to gather it into eternal life. (*Evil* 58 - 59)

My point is not that the modern artist may not, in fact, be the secular version of Christ, though the possibility that s/he may be an empty headed trust-fund art star, exploiting the axiomatic communicative mechanisms of the liberal public sphere with appropriately “demonic” gestures is not wholly irrelevant. The problem is that the liberal public sphere determines the script. The problem is that even works made by those who desire to dissent in good faith are recuperated by the logic of the liberal public sphere, which pays value to transgression in order to prop up its own deficiencies and lacunae. Alternative media or abyss-artistry does not materialize in a vacuum, but emerges from this particular arrangement. Consequently, it recapitulates the very dynamics it wishes to destroy by, unwittingly, fomenting a valuation paid to the wrong side -- literally, the business-end -- of transgression.

#### **D. Alternative Media: Myriad Forms**

If invidious comparison is as ubiquitous as Veblen would have us believe, and the purview or province of alternative media constitutes some ineffable manifestation or expression of this phenomenon -- in its always being “ahead” of mass culture’s “actual” desires --, then what is the use of meditating on its physiognomy, character or development? Isn’t alternative media simply a more honest expression of mass cultural anxieties and aspirations? If so, then, like Popeye, that paragon of transparency, alternative media can claim, “I yam what I yam,” or perhaps, like the old testament god,

“I am that I am” (Exodus 3:14). Alternative media is named, known (in whatever guise, as with Yahweh) and will provide answers if sought after. It must then be understood as present and available for those willing to pursue, investigate and make inquiries of it; inquiries from which much, presumably, can be revealed. Sadly, this is not the case; alternative media is not simply the obverse of disavowed culture. It may, as with the larger cultural engine beneath which it labours, be ignited by emulative consumption, but Veblen’s schematic does not seem sufficient ground from which to judge, reckon with or pigeonhole all forms of alternative media. Especially in light of the fact that some of its component parts -- such as its news-oriented faction -- appear far too utilitarian to easily accommodate parallels made of it and the predatory instinct. It may often constitute itself as the forerunner of a given fashion cycle; the pioneer (or perhaps coal mine canary) making the inaugural foray into a cycle of status-hierarchy jockeying. But it is multifarious and requires some consideration outside of the cause-and-effect characterization suggested by my reading of Veblen within an abyss-artistry-redemption framework. I will therefore finish this chapter with a brief overview of alternative media’s most prevalent varieties.

We have established that alternative media does not accommodate easy designation. Other than its thorough heterogeneity at the level of content, however, it is often also distinguished by its tendency toward non-hierarchical and grassroots organization, openness, transparency, participatory nature and political commitments (Uzelman, 2005; O’Sullivan et al. 1994). Here we see the traits of alternative media as it is most often perceived: as an antidote to “the media.” Much alternative media is in response to the

contemporary media climate of globalized corporate media control (Thussu, 2000; Herman & McChesney, 1997) and often attempts to draw attention to media corporatization and lobbies for structural media reform. This type of alternative media is extensive and takes the forms of blogs, magazines, fanzines, community radio, and even syndicated radio programs, such as Pacifica's "Democracy Now!". It is also found in participatory networks such as Independent Media Center (Indymedia), an online collaboration between international grassroots collectives that report on political issues.

In fact, there are concerns that the digital proliferation of such media is so extensive that the possibility of counterhegemonic articulations are lost in the effluvia of ever-burgeoning communicativity; that is, that the amplification of communicative access has contributed to political anemia. This is due the deluge of information and spectacle undermining political content -- the particulars of political discourse are lost within vast data streams: the monetized circulation, the capitalization of constant movement -- as well as the "fantasy of participation," wherein one believes that one's contribution to rivers of data is a political action and absolves oneself of further political engagement. These problems describe phenomena that Jodi Dean calls "Communicative Capitalism" (Dean 2008) and comprise a serious dilemma for even the most stubbornly starry-eyed advocate of digital political utopias.

The fact that the globalizing market economy has aided and abetted the convergence of media is generally understood to be an unassailable observation (Bagdikian, 1997; Herman & McChesney, 1997). Commodification of news media leads to media that is driven by market demands and the deleterious effects of such demands

are, by now, relatively well known: the centralizing of media control in the hands of business elite; media that has its content shaped by advertiser interest; the subsequent propensity for media to take the form of entertainment; minimal public participation, etc (Herman & McChesney, 1997, Chomsky & Herman, 1988). Responses to this state of affairs comprise the journalistic media initiatives listed above. It is worth noting, however, that Herman and Chomsky's "propaganda model" of news media (in the global north) may paint a picture of the mediascape in overly broad strokes. In contrast to the dominant ideology thesis of the propaganda model, those overviews of news media that admit of a struggle for social leadership, best articulated in Gramscian terms as ideological hegemony, between cultural producers and consumers, allow for recognition of the (ostensibly) free and open debate characteristic of open democracies and the critical scrutiny that news media inevitably receives. Cultural "producers" and "consumers" are increasingly porous categories, what with the ascension of the so-called "prosumer" and the "content generators" of the network revolution enabling individuals to act as bardic functionaries or media watch-dogs, giving more play and creating more tension between traditional conceptions of production and reception. Nonetheless, focusing exclusively on the fact that critical scrutiny of the media may well be blackballed or distorted, that is, managed, by dominant and monopolistic news media conglomerates acting at the behest of economic and political interests, is to concentrate exclusively on cognitive communications and to disregard the effects of affective communications -- the aesthetic and emotional features of culture and politics -- that

which Jim McGuigan maintains is at play in the *cultural* public sphere (McGuigan, 2009).

McGuigan's update on Habermas entails the bifurcation of democratic communications into two discrete but interrelated spheres, the public and the cultural public, with the former encompassing cognitive matters, that is, the diffusion of news and information, and the latter encompassing the emotional and affective dimension of personal and public politics; i.e., the negotiation of lifeworld situations in the individual subject's experiences (and upon which can be mapped the pleasures and pains of mass-popular culture) (McGuigan, 2005). The cultural public sphere then has implications on the public sphere and rational-critical debate can be understood to have some emotive underpinnings. This points to the significance of circuits of popular culture and admits the importance of cultural production, whether of "high," "low" or "oppositional" character. (And is the relay to the adjoining circuitry of abyss-artistry discussed above).

However, ruthless commodification of cultural production has led to what we might call, "the aesthetization of every day life." That is to say, that culture itself has arguably become the logic of late capitalism (Jameson, 1984; Schwengell, 1991; Harvey, 1990); it is culture that fires economic growth (Veblen's long shadow is here particularly tenebrous). This fact, of course, bodes poorly for cultural production, and the cultural public sphere, especially of a politically-committed or "alternative" stripe, as they are, of course, a part and parcel of culture writ large. We are back to the elephant in the room; commodification as "alterity's" double or nemesis. The concern over this state of affairs is not new; indeed, it is the perennial bugaboo of the art world. We see shades of this

problem in the great Modernist debates about art and autonomy (Burger, 1989; Mann, 1991). From early avant-garde to FLUXUS and Conceptual Art, many modernist movements were grappling with the thorny problems caused by the processes of commodification, conceptualized most forcefully as the "culture industry" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947): that is, the totalizing effects of monopoly capitalism, which deprive the constituent parts of culture—art included—from its critical substance (Burger, 1992).

Standard consternation about processes of commodification might concern itself, by and large, with questions about authenticity (what with efficacy and/or credibility of alternative media often perceived as contingent on autonomy), illustrated most starkly in the often invoked condemnation of “selling out.” This issue -- the idea of the authentic -- is, as noted, operative not just at the level of what amounts to “street cred,” but also, as I have mentioned and will try to argue further, is the feather in contemporary invidious-comparison’s cap.

A prominent variant of alternative media perceives itself as a mechanism which can help to breakdown hierarchies of meaning-making (Langlois & Dubois 2005, Klein, 2000); that it can help create free spaces and periods of respite in day-to-day life (de Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1989; Hamilton, 2000; Mouffe, 1988; Rodriguez, 2001). From within these spaces, individuals may feel as though they are “active subjects,” empowered by feelings of physical or symbolic participation, which in turn may help to foment horizontal, non-hierarchical forms of social organization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This is the primary engine of a species of alternative media referred to as tactical media (TM).

Like the broader heading, “alternative media,” under which it can be filed, tactical media is, unsurprisingly, not easy to define. In fact, it is unlikely that there is an apt categorical description of tactical media interventions and there certainly is not an adequate signifier for the objects which tactical media create and/or employ. Tactical media does not labour under an aesthetic rubric or even an instrumental aegis; its product is eminently incongruous and variegated. Tactical media is perhaps best conceived of as an impulse or as “expressions of dissent” (Renzi, 2008). These expressions are deliberately decentralized; horizontally organized, diversified; often ephemeral; and, perhaps above all, aspire to autonomist creation and space (Garcia and Lovink, 1997). If the term refers to activities that have any similarity at all, it would probably be by virtue of the fact that tacticality eschews permanence -- it is the work of guerilla fighters with no space of their own. It makes raids into territories dominated by the institutional other. This feature of ephemerality is likely due to the work of Michel de Certeau, whose writing on tactics characterized them as insinuations into the space or place of the other without taking it over (2000). That this idea has won over so many adherents seems to testify to a pessimism operating beneath tactical media’s commitments and speaks to its historical moment -- there does not appear to be an “outside” to late capitalism; that is, a space from which to methodically organize oppositional struggle. Consequently, enthusiasm for ephemerality -- small day to day resistances -- enjoys considerable popularity (though, as mentioned above, OWS may signal an end to the vogue of TM and it may not be premature to say of it that it belonged to the post new left’s political anemia in the wake of Reagan and Thatcherism).

Activities as dissimilar as detouring billboards or hijacking copyrighted material through DJ-ing or video-blogging are understood to be examples of tactical media. In its enthusiasm for conscripting art or creative practise to its oppositional ends, it is very much a contemporary phenomenon; tactical media theorists and practitioners are children of the “Information Age” and are painfully aware that subjectivities are constructed and so are eager to counter those representations in mass culture created by what they understand, as with alternative media generally, to be an oligopolistic media industry (Renzi, 2008; Langlois & Dubois, 2005). But there are two-faces to tactical media: where one is artistic, the other is comprised of a close relationship with digital media and networked activism.

Tactical media is often marked by its celebration of media technology that is open-source (Uzelman, 2005; Boler *State*, 2008; Critical Art Ensemble, 2001). Many tactical media endeavours are wholly indebted to the reticulum of the internet, as with the oft cited open-source website Indymedia mentioned above (Pickard, 2006; Langlois, 2005). Cyberactivism, or “digital resistance,” forms a good portion of tactical media’s bailiwick and manifests both online -- in development of open-source code, computer hacking, or in waggish website parodies, such as @TMark’s faux information site on George Bush (Daniels, 2009) -- and off. Real world digital activism is seen in the use of decentralized digital technologies as concrete networking tools in the formation of itinerant, highly mobile anti-corporate and anti-globalization movements (Juris, 2005). These features of tactical media reflect the fact that its advent coincides with that of emergent digital culture and the so-called information age, but it also reveals something of tactical media’s

ontic character. Some species of digital tactical media seem simply to be hymns to the hypostatization of the digital age. There are strains of digital tactical media that see liberation in the potential and opportunity seemingly promised by technological development. In this sense, it bears some resemblance to those theories that myopically jettison economic factors and discuss the impact of digital mediation on culture as a self-propelling, and remarkably democratic process (see Deuze, 2006). Even if one disregards the obvious problem posed by the digital divide to utopian conceptions of technology, a more trenchant take on tactical media's spiritual affiliation with a mediated worldview--and its corollaries of de-localization, atomisation, digital networking, and global flows--recognizes that tactical media, like digital culture writ large, is itself a reflection of contemporary economic structures. As Ray and Sholette write in "Whither Tactical Media:" "For better and for worse, the nomadic agency of TM corresponds exactly to the de-territorialized spaces of global capitalism" (522). Furthermore, enthusiasm for resistance through technological development provides a tenon for the mortise of active audience theory: digital resistance sings hosanna to "choice" (read as freedom), understood by reception theory to interpellate the audience as "active." But this "choice," and its profusion, is a hallmark of postmodern capitalism (Ang, 1996). The matter of Tactical Media, particularly the notion that it is simply an update of 60s-style oppositionality, will be explored further in Chapter 3.

Lastly, there is the argument, explored in the preceding sections of this chapter, that because much of alternative media percolates in the so-called "underground," it is always one step ahead of "mainstream" culture and so can be said to be an agent of "difference"

or "distinction" or "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1984) and so may simply aid and abet the commodification and aesthetization of contemporary culture. It is not outrageous to say that most criticisms of this character are indebted to Veblen, whether they are aware of it or not. Difference and distinction are precisely those social features that are employed by, subsumed within, and valorized by capital (Artz, 2003; Artz, Macek and Cloud, 2006; Frank, 1998; Heath & Potter, 2004; Root, 2006). This fact has weighty implications for so-called "culture-jamming," which in many ways prefigures the ascendant mode of remix culture, which, despite its admirable hostility to the dominative strictures of copyright, is nonetheless the aesthetic manner du jour. This critique is similar to some of the criticisms of tactical media, but it applies more directly to oppositional culture which conscripts endlessly, and often fetishistically, from vanguard aesthetics, and frequently elides content with form. Currently, enthusiasm for pastiche aesthetic and ironical distance frequently informs a great deal of the production of oppositional "underground" media. A text-book example of this is the magazine *Vice*, which began as an arts and culture zine out of Montréal with a bratty punk rock attitude and has since become a glossy fashionista publication out of NYC that maintains a bratty, "punk rock" attitude.<sup>26</sup> This is the arena in which the charge of aestheticizing politics and culture hits home with a depressing accuracy. Despite alternative media's championing of radical politics, it can still be party to what has been dubbed "rebel" consumerism (Frank and Weiland, 1997)

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<sup>26</sup> *Vice's* attempts, in the last few years, of using foreign correspondents in global hotspots suggests a bid toward "sincere," or more traditional, journalism. Magazines emerging from the aughts and exhibiting the quintessential "hipster" aesthetics of irony and pastiche -- instantiated forcefully in the popular trope of assembling and displaying anonymous personal photographs (usually of the 70s or early 80s), often depicting family vacations and the like -- include, for example, *Zine Soup*, a collection of international, self-published art and graphic zines; Belgian-based *A Magazine*, a fashion magazine the content of which is "curated" for each issue by a guest designer; and London and New York based (notice that all these magazines straddle nodal points of globalized capital) *Sup Magazine*, which covers music and culture.

and the creation of incredibly lucrative niche markets (see Kalle Lasn's *Adbusters* media empire or the wholesale commodification of the punk genre, e.g., Vans Warped Tour, *Good Charlotte*, etc.).

This is as good a point as any to return to take up the original thread of this chapter: The commodification of rock 'n' roll, of hip jive, daddy-O. As I have remarked, the prominence of narratives -- of dissent in "difference" and/or transgression -- constituting personal liberty or disenfranchisement are difficult to fathom. We live in an age where former (Republican) Florida Governor and Senator Charlie Crist has recently successfully bid for the pardon of 1960s bad-boy Jim Morrison's alleged genital exposure at a Door's concert some 40 years previous.<sup>27</sup> *Nobody* in pop culture roots for "One-Dimensional Man." Not even the Objectivist camp is a proponent of hyperbolic social repression emblemized by the stolidity of 1950s suburban living. Which is somewhat surprising, what with Ayn Rand's proponents including Clarence Thomas and Alan Greenspan, who can hardly be considered posterboys for technicolor freak flag flyin'. But even John Galt advocates rising above the crowd. Or rather, John Galt *in particular* advocates for rising above the contemptible masses. Libertarianism is a fair-weather friend and is as likely to turn up at left-wing bacchanals as it is to attend a right-wing fete at a five-star restaurant. If the left desires to gloss over libertarianism in conservative thought, conservatives aren't willing to cooperate. Tracing the trajectory of American conservatism in the twentieth century, Paul Gottfried and Thomas Fleming discuss the origins of the right-wing flagship magazine, *National Review*: "[the libertarian editors] of

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<sup>27</sup> Jason Linkins, "Charlie Crist Wins Pardon for Jim Morrison," *The Huffington Post*, 12 December 10.

*Freeman* eventually joined the staff of what became the more widely circulated, anti-collectivist periodical. Their antistatist, individualist creed remained essential to the moral teachings of the *National Review*--and was then imperfectly transferred to the conservative politics of the 1960s" (3).

Individualism is championed in both liberal and conservative camps, though by virtue of some sort of wishful thinking, it is often presupposed that there is actually some extant straw man conservative, rubbing her knuckles and giving dark obeisance to the gods of False Needs and Social Control. There is no cabal of bowtie-wearing conservatives yearning for control of the plebs. Indeed, conservatives are happy to exploit the liberal public sphere's dependable injunction to toleration, as a quick glimpse at the pro-life camp's catalogue of horrors quickly attests. They too relish the abyss-artistry-redemption compact. Indeed, the bogeyman of social pressure for staid, conformist decorum is a bi-partisan, inverted *ex nomination* of capitalist fluidity and fungibility. One would think that, what with all the blockbuster movies celebrating the triumph of the "little guy" over the evil corporation, we surely have, by now, clued into the fact that we *really* do root for the awkward loner, whose outsider status marks her as the protagonist/rebel. Capitalism happily admits anti-capitalist sentiment in its entertainments and diversions. Mark Fisher *pace* Zizek gives the example of Disney's *Wall-E*, the animated feature in which a future world has been laid to waste by consumerism and corporations, and notes that this "gestural anti-capitalism" reinforces "capitalist realism" (12). To parse what he means, it will be necessary to turn our attention the mechanics of commodification.

## Chapter 2

### Commodification and the Knavish Trickery of “the Authentic” (Loki’s Slippery Return)

I remember the time I went to my first rare-book fair and saw how the first editions of Thoreau and Whitman and Crane had been carefully packaged in the heat-shrunk plastic with the price tags on the inside. Somehow the simple addition of air-tight plastic bags had transformed the books from vehicles of liveliness into commodities.

-- Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*, 1971

Bowie’s “Changes” in a BMW ad... Think I’m gonna puke.

-- Mike McDonald, of seminal Canadian Prairie - punk outfit, Jnr. Gone Wild, Facebook “Wall” Post, Oct, 2011

We are a Faustian age determined to meet the Lord or the Devil before we are done, and the ineluctable ore of the authentic is our only key to the lock.

- Norman Mailer, 1971

#### A. Cultural Objects and Commodity Fetishism

According to Martha Ertman and John Williams, “‘commodification’ is the term scholars use to describe the process of something becoming understood as a commodity, as well as the state of affairs once this has taken place” (1). It is arguable that the “state of affairs” resultant from the ascension of market-place logics is the global ubiquity of generalized commodity production and a prevalent enthusiasm for the liberal conception of freedom as ostensibly enshrined in processes of commodification. Contrary to the celebration of market-place capitalism, however, is the suspicion that there are damaging

externalities effected by the process of commodification and that “the harms of commodification take many forms -- from dignitary to economic exploitation, from changes in people’s material lives to changes in the discourse through which their self-conception is constructed and survives” (Radin and Sunder 9). It is this last point which concerns us here; that is, the effects of commodification on culture and meaning making. Why is it that we understand without any further elaboration the quotes above, wherein David Bowie selling “Changes” to BMW induces vomit and Lewis Hyde decries the transformation of a book -- a well-loved classic, no less -- into a “commodity.” Indeed, Hyde’s larger point is that art operates differently in a “gift economy” than it does under marketplace logics and the next sentence, missing from the epigraph above, reads: “In commodity exchange it’s as if the buyer and seller were both in plastic bags; there’s none of the contact of the gift exchange” (*Gift* 12). What is the damage wrought by these prophylactic bags? What do they represent? We know what is being suggested here, but to define exactly what Hyde means would be a harder task.

“Cultural commodification” -- refracted blindingly off the shiny sheen of Hyde’s plastic sacs -- comprises a highly contested terrain that has been commented on *ad infinitum*. Terms, catchwords and locutions for the commodification of culture are legion and attest to both the scrutiny it has been afforded as well as its obduracy, its refusal of resolution: reification; recuperation; “sell-out;” “mainstream” vs “alternative;” cultural appropriation; the possibility or impossibility of autonomy in art; pop culture; the spectacle, the culture industry, etc. Given these vexing features of commodification, a return to basics, so to speak, seems advisable. Pursuant to the inquiry that is here being

attempted, it is necessary to perform a brief reckoning with Marx's conception of commodity fetishism in order to furnish notions of cultural commodification with robust designations and terminology.

In "Commodities and the Politics of Value," Arjun Appadurai makes the incisive observation that the term "commodities" is increasingly divorced from its connotation as understood by Marx and classical economists; it has been eclipsed, claims Appadurai, by the neoclassical conception of "goods." The value of a good is often conceived of in terms of utility, following marginal utility theory, thereby obscuring a labour theory of value. Consequently, as Appadurai notes, "in most contemporary [understandings], commodities are special kinds of manufactured goods (or services), which are associated only with capitalist modes of production and are thus only to be found where capitalism has penetrated" (35). This, of course, evokes disputations as to the extent to which capitalism has "penetrated" or expanded worldwide. Without following Appadurai down the rabbit-hole of globalization to a debate about marginal, barter and gift economies, we can acknowledge that his observation serves to draw our attention to the often incomplete perception of what constitutes a commodity. Marx does not appear to have made the claim that the commodity form bursts from the head of a product or good fully formed under capitalist conditions, rather that commodity production as a basic building block of economic life presupposes capitalist conditions. Moreover, despite the fact that in some quarters, the New Gospel proclaims that we have reached the end of history and that the free market and liberal democracy are globally triumphant,<sup>28</sup> the fact remains that labour

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<sup>28</sup> The recessions beginning in 2008 have deeply troubled this narrative. Moreover, the emergence of OWS, a movement which has put economic issues front and centre, as of the time of this writing, seems to offer the hope of further contestation of capitalist triumphalism.

is often performed under duress. This contradicts Marx's observation that "the transition to the capitalist mode of production is completed only when direct force and the coercive force of external economic conditions are used only in exceptional cases"<sup>29</sup> (Taussig 22). This can hardly be said of global working conditions and it is highly debatable as to whether it is even true in the global north. Nonetheless, it is not a stretch to agree, in general, with the cheerleaders of free marketers that capitalism is in full global bloom, whether or not it has fully *penetrated* those small bastions of pre-modern enclaves or smattering of socialist states (which would likely be "Third Way" governments anyhow). In either case, by noting this contemporary deficiency in perceiving commodity forms, Appadurai highlights the centrality of Marx's conception of commodity fetish to unpacking processes of commodification.

Marx writes in *Capital* that "[a] commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and is easily understood" (81). Upon closer inspection, however, this triviality is revealed to be a falsehood: "analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (81). Although the properties of a commodity that satisfy a human need -- its use-value -- seem transparent, they are bound-up with labour and exchange-value in such a way as to make the seemingly unambiguous nature of the commodity chimerical or misleading. In fact, commodities, as a product of human labour, are social *things* that are simultaneously

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<sup>29</sup> This observation refers to the "naturalization" of working conditions and the emergence of the working class. However, the fact remains that estimates for contemporary global slavery number roughly 27 million (see <http://abolitionmedia.org/about-us/modern-slavery-statistics>). In Marxist analysis, slavery is simply not productive enough to properly aid in capitalist accumulation. Moreover, slavery, as the engine that fired "primitive accumulation," is seen as capitalism's starting point, not a precondition of its continued functioning. For an illuminating examination of this issue see Robin Blackburn's *The Making of New World Slavery: from the Baroque to the Modern, 1492-1800*. Verso, 1997

perceptible and imperceptible to the human senses (Marx, *Capital* 83). Whereas a use-value, a commodity's utility, is that which causes one to purchase a commodity (utility thus resides in useless leisure items such as positional goods), its exchange-value is the quantitative measure of the commodity's value as determined in relation to other commodities. Commodity production then, must be production of exchange. This fact is illustrated well by Michael Taussig who writes in *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* that

As a commodity [a] shoe has the exchange-value function: it can generate profit for its owner and seller over and above the use-value that it holds for the person who eventually buys and wears it. In its exchange-value the shoe is qualitatively identical with any other commodity, no matter how much they may differ in terms of their use-value properties. [...] By virtue of this abstraction, which is based on market exchange and the universal equivalence of money, a palace is equal to a certain number of shoes, just as a pair of shoes is equal to a certain fraction of an animal's hide. (25 - 26)

This exchange-value, although determined by a given commodity's relationship to other commodities, is the result of human labour. As commodities have both use- and exchange-value so too does labour have a two-fold character. "Concrete-labour" and "abstract-labour" correspond with the production of, respectively, use-value and exchange-value in a commodity (Marx, *Capital* 48 - 49, 84). Where concrete-labour refers to the skills and expertise needed to produce a given object, abstract-labour refers

to human labour-power generally (Marx, *Capital* 49 - 50). It is because abstract-labour can be reduced to a uniform quality that concrete-labour can be made comparable and the ensuing products can be exchanged (Marx, *Capital* 49 - 51). Again, Taussig casts Marx's ideas into sharp relief and hints at the spectre of surplus value: "What the capitalist acquires in buying the commodity of labour power as an exchange-value is the right to deploy the use-value of labour as the intelligent and creative capacity of human beings to produce more use-values than those that are reconverted into commodities as the wage" (26). This reduction of labour-power, expressed as abstract-labour, is measured by the "socially average" time it takes to produce a commodity and its relationship to the production of other commodities (Marx, *Capital* 49 - 53). The adage "time is money" takes on a sinister sheen.

A commodity is therefore a misleading or "mysterious" object simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour [...] When we bring the products of our labour into relation with each other as values, it is not because we see in these articles the material receptacles of homogenous human labour. [Rather, through exchange we equate as values our different products and unconsciously impute this value onto the different kinds of labour expended on them]. Value, therefore, does

not stalk about with a label describing what it is. [It is value] that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. (Marx, *Capital* 83 - 85)

The implications of these observations are manifold, but the two that are most obvious are those that are germane to situating cultural commodification in a manner relevant to my meditations on oppositional cultural production. The first, the matter of surplus value, though bound up with the forthcoming point, will be treated, as far as it is possible, independently. The second, the corollary of commodity fetishism, will inform discussion of cultural hegemony and ideology, which will underlay the concerns of the end of this section (and will have to be considered against those issues addressed in chapter 1).

Although surplus value is significant and highly imbricated with commodity fetishism, it does not relay to subsequent examination of cultural commodification as readily as do the consequences of commodity fetishism and so will be dealt with first.

The abstraction of labour allows for the homogenization of labour power -- due to its flattening or reduction of particular or specialized concrete labour so that labour itself may be commodified -- and is what causes the separation of a worker from her or his creative impulses; it is that which makes labour instrumental. Moreover, as indicated by the Taussig quote above, it also enables capital or the capitalist system to control the labour of workers. Deprived of sufficient capital to control production, the ostensibly free worker can be forced to labour longer than is necessary to produce goods that are essential for her or his survival: “the hidden mechanism that ensures the creation of surplus out of a situation that appears as nothing more than the fair exchange of

equivalents [the purchasing of labour power] is the movement back and forth of labour as an exchange-value and labour as a use-value” (Taussig 27). Not only is this a situation in which the worker is divorced from the fruit of their labours (what does this mean for the “creative worker”?), but it almost guarantees that s/he will never be in control of the means of production. For the cultural worker,<sup>30</sup> this has heavy consequences as it means that it is unlikely that she will be able to create culturally dominant representations which attest to or speak to meanings pertinent to her life, practise and/or experience.

Carl Freedman concisely summarizes the corollaries of capital’s withdrawal of surplus value from wage earners:

Under capitalism, the wages paid to the proletariat must necessarily be of lesser value than the commodities produced by them. The differential is surplus value, and its extraction from the working class is what makes profit itself possible. In order for capitalism to function, however, surplus-value must not only be not only extracted but also realized, that is, transformed into money by the sale of commodities on the market; yet, by definition, the workers themselves, whose only cash is their wages, lack the resources to buy all the commodities they have made. (5)

Consequently, those artisans, carpenters, etc creating the creature comforts of lounges and parlours for business elites will never even be permitted to see the fruits of their labours,

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<sup>30</sup> The matter of labour, in the information sector or “knowledge economy,” becoming “immaterial labour” that is comprised of symbols, information or affect and is often routed through information and communications technologies, finds resonance in Marx’s conception of the “general intellect.” See the next section below.

let alone enjoy them, in the penthouse suites of skyscrapers in mid-town Manhattan (or, as Saskia Sassen points out in “Whose City is it? Globalization and the Formation of New Claims,” any other nodal point, i.e., mega trading centre, in the transnational space of international high finance and business. New York becomes Tokyo becomes London becomes Paris). This is the yawning chasm between a labourer and the result of her labour: she is denied the harvest of her work. Similarly, within the creative industries it means that artistic or creative labour will be directed by those who own the means of production ensuring that the separation between labourer and her or his product transpires long before the commodity item is completed. This seems most obvious in contemporary cinema where teams of digital special effects workers will toil for months on a scene that will not run longer than a minute or two at the behest of a film’s director (at the behest of the producers at the behest of the film studio), but it is true, to varying extents, in all creative industries, from music to writing to drama.

This situation becomes incredibly complex and muddled in the arena of visual fine art wherein a given artwork, especially those that comment on the social, often appear to be *sui generis*, which gives them a sheen of authorial freedom. Created by the lone artist, visual art works easily re-inscribe the myth of the individual genius somehow working outside the material conditions of her historical moment. However, the two necessary features of fine art industries -- i.e., the milieu in which her productions will be displayed -- are criticism and exhibition, which themselves are vulnerable to the law of value, i.e., commodified. As Deborah Root writes, “a certain luster surrounds the art object and those who create, market, and collect high art, and this luster draws attention

away from the extent to which art must conform to market forces” (139). Why are certain works valorized above others? What determines what works will and will not be seen?

While the problems posed by the fine art world appear to be qualitatively different than more obvious examples of exploitation of cultural workers (say, the legions of designers working in advertising or the video-game industry, etc) it should be obvious that they, like the selfsame problems workers face in other creative industries, are a result of the conditions necessary to produce surplus-value.<sup>31</sup> Again, not only are workers not in control of the means of production they are not in control of the fruits of their own labour. This dissociation of a worker from her work is a necessary component of the conditions which ensure the creation of surplus-value. Marx called this alienated labour (Marx, *Alienated*). This alienation, under capitalist conditions, is a vicious circle that is the result of the productive forces it both demands and effects: “the worker produces capital and capital produces him. Man is simply a worker, and as a worker his human qualities only exist for the sake of capital which is alien to him. [...] The existence of capital is his existence [...] and] it determines the content of his life independently of him” (Marx, *Private* 110 - 111). The creative worker must labour to exist (in both practical and, under capitalism, metaphysical terms!) but will never have the power to determine the character of her work *or* to recoup the spirit of her labour once it has been imputed into a commodity to give it value. The point that is being driven at here, as it relates specifically to creative enterprise, is succinctly and eloquently phrased by Salmon Rushdie, of all

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<sup>31</sup> This problem is ramified by digital networks -- see the next section below -- and the increasing use of “free” labour in the form of recent graduates who must work as interns to properly bolster their resume for the highly competitive marketplace of the creative economies. See “Writers Explain What It's Like Toiling on the Content Farm.” *Media Shift*, 21 July 2010 and Ross Perlin, *Intern Nation*, New York: Verso, 2011.

people, who asserts that, “those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless” (as qtd in Radin and Sunder 19). For creative labourers, this is, quite simply, the problem posed by power relations which delimit possibilities of verisimilitudinous representation and taint the process of meaning making. How might cultural producers negotiate this problem (and to what extent might they actually identify it as a problem)?

Returning now to the issue of commodity fetishism, it is telling that Marx uses the term “social hieroglyphic” to denote the inscrutable presence of value in a commodity, for a commodity’s value has little to nothing to do with its perceptible or material features. It is a commodity’s supra-sensible qualities that endow it with value (created by the requisite labour needed, which is embedded in the object) (Marx, *Capital* 83). These qualities are, of course, invisible, which is why they require special interpretation; thus the likening of the commodity to a hieroglyphic. The remarkable thing about this observation, as hinted at earlier, is that it points to the fact that the aspect of this supra-sensible quality that *is* appreciable in the commodity is expressed through a commodity’s price (Marx, *Capital* 84 - 85). This has the profound implication of collapsing all the labour, social co-operation, and specialized skills that are necessary for a commodity’s production into its exchange-value (Marx, *Capital* 84 - 87). This, the displacement of human labour into *things* is the fetish character of commodities. The seemingly objective status of the exchange-value of commodities, which is exactly that around which social activity is mediated, causes the process of commodification to seem natural. This is what

Marx is referring to when he claims, as quoted earlier, “the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour” (Marx, *Capital* 83). This, of course, configures society in a very specific way, granting the value of human relations to objects or things. Taussig does not spare the acid when he describes what this means for the larger social body:

Fetishism denotes the attribution of life, autonomy, power, and even dominance to otherwise inanimate objects and presupposes the draining of these qualities from the human actors who bestow the attribution. [...] Social relationships are dismembered and appear to dissolve into relationships between mere things -- the products of labour exchanged on the market -- so that the sociology of exploitation masquerades as a natural relationship between systemic artifacts. Instead of man being the aim of production, production has become the aim of man and wealth the aim of production... (31- 32)

This is a situation that appears almost impossible to step outside of; escape seems inconceivable: “[Capital] has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation” (Marx & Engels 222). Personal worth and social relations are reduced to exchange-value. The idea that capitalism has “no outside” is not a new one, but its ramifications are given stark articulation by Mark Fisher’s conception of “capitalist realism,” (alluded to in the conclusion of Chapter 1 above) as “what is left when beliefs

have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics” (4). Capitalist realism cautions against confronting its abyssal latitude or scope, as to do so would be to mobilize the “fatal abstractions” of the past; “capitalist realism presents itself as a shield protecting us from the perils posed by belief itself” (Fisher 5).

Dissatisfaction at this state of affairs seems difficult to articulate: one is already implicated into this system of social relations and, even if someone were able to somehow to “step outside,” to arrive at the exterior of this system, what could be said of the cultural production that might be created from this position that would allow reprovable expression? Would these expressions no longer be commodities? Would their rebukes or reprehension be meaningful if they *were* commodities? How do cultural producers, particularly those with an oppositional mandate, negotiate these questions? The problems of false consciousness, ideology, recuperation and reification are here raising their heads, which I will briefly address in the next section (although it is beyond the scope of this paper to properly follow the trails suggested by these terms). By shifting into this arena, we begin to see the contours of subsequent Marxist theorizing of Marxist conceptions. As Ben Agger writes, “What Marx called commodity fetishism, which he argued is built into every commodified relationship in which workers exchange their power for a living wage, foreshadows cultural hegemony and domination in that it has in common with them *the false representation and hence endorsement of existing social relationships*” (original emphasis 92).

The concerns of Lukács, Althusser and the Frankfurt school are anticipated by Marx in a famous and frequently evoked passage from the “Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy:” “The mode of production of the material means of existence conditions the whole process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social existence that determines their consciousness” (217 - 218). This sets the template for ensuing considerations, which are summarized aptly by Christain Fuchs, who notes that

Louis Althusser stressed that ideology is a “system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group.” “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” The Frankfurt School argued that with the establishment of 20th century capitalism, mass media, and culture have taken on commodity form in a way that simplifies and distorts reality and keeps people calm by preoccupying them with light entertainment. Consciousness becomes instrumental like any machinery; reflection gets substituted by standardized automatic reactions so that potential alternatives to existing society are no longer imaginable and therefore become unlikely. (32)

How can anyone, particularly cultural producers who may desire to comment on the social in a critical manner, evade the problems resultant from commodity fetishism and

the social structure it enacts? Especially when *consciousness* itself has become “instrumental”?

These issues take on a particular salience in the arena of popular music, as already noted, where, since the 1960s, commerce has been considered inimical to “authentic” rock music (or hip hop, metal, etc). Evidently, critique of “exchange-value” culture has become *de rigueur* even in massified corporate popular culture. Contrary to the Frankfurt school critique, which maintained that popular music foisted upon its public repetitive narratives of idealized social relations and naturalized material conditions, it appears as though an oppositional streak is now a component part of popular music *and its saleability* (Seiler 204). As Cotten Seiler notes, “the rock artist [uses] art to indict and to locate a way out of the rationalized system of domination effected by modern capitalism. The more profound and fertile the opposition, the greater the value of the art” (207). It is worth noting here that, as we have seen through Marx’s unpacking of the commodity form, talk of value is almost meaningless outside of the relational field of exchange-value. Indeed, Seiler goes on to observe that “although popular music has demonstrated [an ability] to inspire and anchor counterhegemonic sensibilities, the alacrity and success with which the culture industry has marketed [popular music’s] affective structure and channelled those sensibilities toward consumption must be soberly acknowledged” (222). Given that popular music can be mustered as a stand-in for other forms of cultural production, what are we to make of the evolution of commodification? Commodified cultural forms appear to have a *de facto* oppositional built-in character. Again, alterity is not so rare a precious metal as is presupposed (or, put another way, the lens through

which it is generally perceived is faulty). This seems to further muddy the waters for the politically committed cultural producer, but it is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. However, it is worth asking what, exactly, is transpiring when dissent or opposition is absorbed into the cash nexus? When Seiler mentions the successful marketization of “antihegemonic sensibilities,” what does this mean? Why is it successful? I believe that the matter of authenticity -- as I discussed it in chapter 1 -- has considerable bearing on the problem of commodified transgression. Authenticity does not provide a pat answer to this problem, but I would like to make the argument that it is a serviceable loadstar for a discerning examination of oppositional cultural production and the matter of commodification.

## **B. Hegemony, Publicity, Individualism in Modernity, and Loki as Patron Saint of The Authentic**

### **B.1) The Problem of Hegemony**

The benefit of Marx’s analysis of commodification is that it supplies an explanation of the conditions from which the problem posed by the authentic emerges. Or, put another way, the authentic, in the form of cultural capital, is the symptom of a social lack resultant from capitalist social relations. Veblenian predation, refracted through the abyss-artistry-redeemer compact, may provide clues as to the “how” of authenticity, but it is Marx’s analysis of the mode of production from which the liberal sphere arises -- and the attendant understanding of individuality -- that supplies the “why.” But it simultaneously presents the problem posed by conceptions of hegemony by trading on the notion of false consciousness.

The rise of capitalism fostered the rise of the bourgeois public sphere. Arguably, the bourgeois liberal public sphere is the apotheosized expression of Eric Hobsbawm's schematic for the rise of modernity, the leavening agent of which he calls *dual revolution*, comprising the French political and English Industrial revolutions: "the great revolution of 1789 - 1848 was the triumph not of 'industry' as such, but of *capitalist* industry; not of liberty and equality in general, but of *middle class* or '*bourgeois*' liberal society" (italics in original 13). The post-feudal citizen of the nation state imagines herself free to assemble, via representative means, and argue over matters belonging to commodified information; that is, information (ostensibly) free of the influence of the state, church or sovereign.

Whatever other falsehoods attend the liberal public sphere, the notion that it is populated by sovereign selves is maybe its most confounding. Individualism is "the mainspring of bourgeois/capitalist philosophy; the doctrine that individuals are the starting point and source of human action. That is, each person 'owns' his or her capacities (especially their capacity to labour) and is not in debt to society (or feudal overlord) for these capacities [...] This 'freedom' of the individual, then, is what underlies the operation of the 'free' market economy" (Hartley 113). The idea of false consciousness tells us that liberal selves are part of a capitalist matrix wherein they are *thingified*; where living social labour, which comprises the lifeworld -- nature, other people, the labourers themselves -- stands apart from oneself. The subject is cleaved from the object and life is lived passively. This is exchange-value culture.

This idea has been taken up extensively since Marx's time, as critics attempted to wrestle with the frustrating fact that, in the absence of violent coercion, subordinate classes have appeared to acquiesce to domination and exploitation.<sup>32</sup> Hegemonic domination is thought to have as its trump card an interpolating ideology which conceals aspects of social relations by making oppression appear as a natural fact. It is not difficult to see how Marx's conception of the commodity fetish is conscripted as explicating agent to this puzzle. But there is simultaneously a flip side to this equation that provides a way out for the seemingly intractable problem of alienated life. Indeed, it is a sleight-of-hand that belongs to Marxist analysis at its seemingly most totalizing. The social conditions in which one is imprisoned are simultaneously the locus or causal agent for one's eventual liberation: the injustices within social reality can only be overturned within social reality itself (i.e., they cannot be fixed from philosophical prescription, but from within the conflict arising from social conditions, i.e., the point is not to interpret the world, it is to *change* it (Marx, *Ideology* 123). A dialectical conception of history maintains that self-fulfillment is born in self-destruction; that emancipatory projects are *historical* projects which arise out of both their own experience *and* their execution and/or realization (I am here conveniently shearing Marxist dialectics from the much thornier issue of eventual material equality belonging to the world historical ascension of an organized working class, etc., etc.). The point being mustered is that material changes attend the forward march of history. With material changes comes changes in social relations: in the act of production, "the producers change, too, in that they bring out new

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<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of Advanced Societies*, London: Hutchinson University Library, 1973; Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, Boston: Beacon, 1975; Louis Althusser & Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*: New York: Verso, 2009.

qualities in themselves, develop themselves in production, transform themselves, develop new powers and new ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new language” (Marx, *Grundrisse* 494). A quick reckoning with contemporary modes of cultural production will be the last link in the argument I am trying to rally in order to show that the yearning for authenticity attends contemporary alterity and oppositional cultural production.

I am not interested, therefore, in tracing the arguments for and against hegemony. I would like to avoid, on the one hand, theories of hegemony which leach the subject of agency by positing her behaviour as irrational; on the other hand, I am not interested in celebrating the ridiculousness of active audience theory, which, to my mind, is merely a cover for an ailing and timorous left (see chapter 3). To sail between the Charybdis of hegemony and Scylla of celebration of quotidian minutiae is no easy feat. I don’t pretend that the listing and leaking vessel I’m navigating may be dashed upon the rocks of considered wisdom belonging to antecedent theorizing. But given that I have suggested several times over that the explanations for consumer capitalism that overlook the obviousness and prevalence of vibrant (ostensive) individualism, as against the duped masses, are deficient, it behooves me to attend to an exploration of the circuit of cultural production which does not propose irrationality on the part of its actors. Consequently, I want to try to make an end-run *around* the vexing argument of hegemony by pointing to invidious distinction as manifesting in our current historical moment as a rational desire for authenticity. Moreover, this desire is perhaps at its most vibrant within the framework of oppositional cultural production as opposition to what might be called “exchange-

value” culture is precisely that which is read as genuine or authentic. As noted above, this requires that the means of contemporary cultural production be considered.

## **B.2) The General Intellect**

The rise of post-Fordism in the global north was akin to an orotund and self-satisfied capitalist dog and pony show, wherein capitalism’s extraordinary ability to adapt and evolve was exhibited over and over again to the beaming smiles and monkey clapping of capital’s functionaries. Post-Fordism is marked, primarily, by decentralized work forces, flexible labour processes, new technologies, highly skilled workforces, and “ample opportunities for workers to become capitalists” (Antonio & Bonanno 21). Post-Fordism seems to present a picture wherein workers do, in fact, own a share in the means of production: knowledge. This situation is anticipated by Marx in a section of the *Grundrisse* known as “The Fragment on Machines,” expounded upon to withering effect in Nick Dyer-Witheford’s *Cyber-Marx*. In the fragment, Marx suggests that, counter to the standard labour theory of value, surplus value will be created by two interrelated components. The first, “scientific labour,” is best understood as technological expertise, while the second, productive organization, is articulated as “social combination” (Marx *Grundrisse* 705). The crucial element in activating these forces in concord will be the “social intellect,” or, in Marx’s singularly apt phrase, “the general productive forces of

the social brain”<sup>33</sup> (Marx *Grundrisse* 709). Dyer-Witford highlights a passage from the *Grundrisse* which succinctly explains that “the main expression of the power of "general intellect" is the increasing importance of machinery - "fixed capital" - in social organisation” (219):

[Machines are] organs of the human brain, created by the human hand: the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and have been transformed in accordance with it. (Marx, *Grundrisse* 706)

This presages momentous alterations in social conditions, including a dire reconfiguration of publicity. As Jack Bratich notes, “living labor, routed through the General Intellect, contains the social cooperation necessary for capitalist production, but is irreducible to it” (8). The public sphere, polis of the abstracted citizen, becomes networked, *abstract knowledge*, belonging to processes of production:

Thought ceases to be an invisible, private activity and becomes something exterior, even public, as it breaks into the productive process. [...] The public [...] is rooted in social production and collaborative material

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<sup>33</sup> This observation is important to some strains of Italian Autonomism, where it is noted that intellectual labour has become a mainstay of post-fordist production, and that, further, intellectual labour is not located only in machinery but in the networked bodies of living subjects who work with them. From this observation emerges speculation on the possibility of a public sphere outside the state and a political community contingent on an emancipated or “autonomous” general intellect. See Paolo Virno, “Notes on the 'General Intellect.’” *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, eds. Saree Makdisi et.al., New York: Routledge, 1996, pp. 265-272

processes, not in any imaginary identification with the topos of the nation-state. Rather than seek out a democracy formed in public discussion, this version of intellectuality begins with the material constitution of democracy, that is in the already existing commons of production and reproduction (whether this takes the form of labor, political experiments, cultural projects, etc.). The public sphere is the political form that emerges from these networks of living cognitive labor, not out of the deliberative mental work of consensual decision-making. (9)

This translocates the issue of publicness into the very mediums in which information is conveyed and objects created; morphing, contorting content and the *meaning* of content. It reconfigures the constellations within which expression is given reign. It reroutes it along public tracks. Tracks which carry along with them private freight, which they cannot help but hurl forward toward their destination of *publicness*, by dint of the cognitive and affective labour inherent to the very rails on which they locomote. Or, as in the droll observation of Blake Stimson, “What ‘the medium is the message’ has always meant is that the medium itself is modernity’s boot camp, the place where subjectivity is broken down or disaggregated or defragged and then reassembled and reordered – into its typographic or Frankensteinian or Metropolis-like composite forms or, for our purposes, into its internet or digital forms – in order to effect a psychosocial reorganisation on the model of the machine” (Stimson 641). The “infernal machine” that is capitalist modernity, transmogrifies alleys and avenues of human expression into massive *coram populo* boulevards. Where once private pathways might have lead to large public squares

(or at least traffic circles), *intended* for the deliberations of the public sphere, these new vectors which exact publicity as the toll which ensures their maintenance replace publicity as an intentional space with publicity as an expression and extension of productive logics.

### **B.3) Individualism and Loki's Authentic**

The result of this set of circumstances may alter the tenor of cultural production, as the marketplace and the general intellect commingle and fuse, further aggravating the already vexed distinction of private/public (setting the stage for new species of abyss-redemption). But it does not point to an evasion of the problems posed by ostensible alterity broached in chapter 1. Indeed, if anything, it further underscores the yearning for individuality amongst liberalism's atomised herds, which is still played off against that secret, the name of which no one will speak, that everyone is flagrantly seeking this selfsame succor. "What we are dealing with now," writes Mark Fisher,

is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture. Witness, for instance, the establishment of settled 'alternative' or 'independent' zones, which endlessly repeat older gestures of rebellion and contestation as if for the first time. 'Alternative' and 'independent' don't designate something outside mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact *the* dominant styles, within the mainstream. (9)

But this might be too hasty a verdict. Surely the search for “alterity” and “independence” have a history that extends past the post-war decades, in particular, the 1990s, where the ubiquity of patented “alternative” culture reached its most richly incongruous apex. The boom in counterculture occurring most visibly in the 1960s was, after all, simply resuscitating a host of distinctly modernist concerns and mannerisms, echoing off of romanticism, the flâneur, and other 18th century trends: flamboyance, a celebration of sensuousness and aesthetics, and a fraught relationship with the urban/rural split. This last point is the item of modernity, the reverberations of which we are still contending with, that underlie much of the character of the authentic. It is prefigured in the writings of such eminently modern figures as Goethe and Rousseau. Rousseau’s wrestling with the corrupting and deforming aspects of “civilization” belong to a time where “civilization” connotes the productive forces of ascendant urban space, where new organization for the deployment of labour was beginning to reform the world. The cities were not yet home to the dark, satanic mills of a fully-fledged industrial revolution, but the productive forces of urban centres were in harness. The sundering from traditional life, of what is often wielded in conceptions of a prelapsarian authentic, is the chasm represented by the rural pastoral and the urban upheaval. This is not entirely caricature. As Robert Heilbroner notes, “[in the 17th century], a system of *personal gain* has not yet taken root. [...] a separate, self-contained economic world has not yet lifted itself from its social context. The world of practical affairs is inextricably mixed up with the world of political, social, and religious life. Until the two worlds separate, there will be nothing that resembles the tempo and the feeling of modern life. And for the two to separate, a long and bitter

struggle must take place” (24). This turmoil ensuing from this struggle is perhaps best encapsulated in the oft-quoted passage of Marx, wherein he paints a picture of capitalist modernity: “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed one become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face [...] the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men” (as qtd in Berman 21).

Perhaps the rise of postmodernity was supposed to signal the end of this struggle. The convulsions wrought by Enlightenment rationality cannot further oppress skeptical minds attuned to difference and metaphysical presumptions. We now see through the lie perpetuated by grand narratives. Humanity is no hero of liberty, etc., etc.<sup>34</sup> I would submit, however, that contemporary conditions are not necessarily a place where some sort of detente has been made with constant flux, where the drive for individuation stems from a different tension than those belonging to the modernist *tragedy of development*. Modern development might reveal itself in contemporary coordinates as slicker and faster iterations of itself, almost indistinguishable from its European origins, but it is still a child of modernity and Hobsbawm’s dual revolution: “The industrial revolution was not indeed an episode with a beginning and an end. To ask when it was “complete” is senseless, for its essence was that henceforth revolutionary change became the norm” ( 44). Marshall Berman makes the convincing claim the tribulations arising from a state of constant revolution are Faustian in nature and that, indeed, Goethe’s *Faust* is an early apologue for

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<sup>34</sup> Although, as John Durham Peters points out, “the postmodernist claim that there can be no more grand narratives about history presupposes a pretty comprehensive grasp of history’s direction -- precisely the kind of epistemological privilege that many postmodernists want to deny” (4).

capitalist development: “Faust fights the old world, the world he has cut himself loose from, by transforming himself into a new type of person, one who asserts and knows himself, [...] who *becomes* himself through restless, endless self-expansion” (58).

Individual development is as fraught a project as humankind’s development. The drive for individualism is no more obscene than modernity itself. It is obtuse to say of modernity that it is “bad.” So too is it preposterous to say that individualism can be placed within an insipid moral binary of evil and virtuous. Individual flourishing is, after all, widely held to be a higher good. The framework within which individual flourishing might come to pass, however, is not instantiated in capitalist modernity, wherein manifold noxiousness attends individualist unfolding. There can be no doubt that “endless self-expansion” carries with it heavy burdens. (But it is worth remembering that patriarchal feudalism is not so great either).

The revolutionary reconfiguring of the self and society that is the hallmark of the capitalist mode of production still forms the bulwark on which individuality rests. Expressions, then, of individualism, manifest as Fisher’s “alternative” or “independent” zones, are necessary extensions of the natural inclination to wrestle with the frenzied and oftentimes brutal march of progress. But the notion of “precorporation,” however, that which Fisher claims is the “pre-emptive” formatting of aspirations, hopes and cultural contestation, sounds a tiny bit like sour grapes. Certainly, the speed with which the process of incorporation transpires is faster than ever before, but to say that contemporary expressions of opposition are “merely” styles that borrow from antecedent gestures of rebellion is to indict all countercultural movements and productions. This is not some

esoteric claim. Popular author and ex-*Rolling Stone* contributor Greil Marcus charts antinomian discontent from punk rock to the Situationist International to modernist avant gardes to anabaptism in *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. He may not be entirely convincing in positing some cabalistic through-line linking all these movements, but the broader point that culture is derivative stands. To think otherwise is to invoke some magical cultural production, created *ex nihilo* by the dark thaumaturgy of the most dangerous subculture yet: wizards. It is the reserve of the middle-aged and elderly to discount everything as having been “done before.” This would probably come as a surprise to youth culture, forever fomenting new countercultural strategies, deportment and practices out of anterior ones. What Fisher is critiquing is not, in my mind, the problem. Under different cultural coordinates, the fact that a good idea becomes commonplace would not be cause for lament (or, conversely, if it were a “bad” idea or behaviour, resultant from an exploitative social matrix, in ideal living conditions, it would be rejected). It is the competitive nature of invidious comparison that renders behaviours and gestures of individualism toxic, *within* “exchange-value” culture. The parvenus signals the trivialization of secret emancipatory creeds and hermetic resistance to older members of the tribe. When *everyone* is an initiate, the value of subterranean truths, the hook on which oppositional individualism is hung, appear commonplace. This is what troubles the odd, manufactured space between appearance and reality -- between how something *seems* and what it actually *is*. In short, individualism telegraphs its bearer’s sincerity or authenticity.

In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling points to the fact that, like individualism itself, sincerity is born in a modern world: "...we cannot say of the patriarch Abraham that he was a sincere man. That statement must seem only comical. The sincerity of Achilles or Beowulf cannot be discussed: they neither have nor lack sincerity" (4). Trilling is interested in teasing out the matter of fidelity to self and the tricky nature of artifice, and he grants that authenticity as we know it emerges out of the painful transition from feudalism (21-21). I do not want to dally with authenticity's tricky relationship with presentation and subterfuge. Rather, I want to exploit its ambiguity so as to encompass the sundry factors which swirl about the convoluted nexus where alterity appears to be domiciled. If an apt metaphor for modern development is Faustian, I volunteer the notion that authenticity, which, as an epiphenomenon of capitalist modernity itself, rising in tandem with individualism as its handmaiden and barometer, be dubbed "Lokiist."

Loki, that singular deity of the Norse pantheon, is the god of trickery and mischief. Some mythologists consider Loki the brother of Odin, highest god in the Norse Pantheon, but as the Norse saga progresses, Loki takes on a malevolent cast and, indeed, is heavily implicated in Ragnarok, Norse mythology's armageddon (Guerber 198). Loki prefigures the contradictions at the heart of modernity, being both seducer and deceiver. An entity of motion, of passion, of the circulation of the blood, he represents fire and the flux of life while simultaneously confounding the living with betrayals and scheming stratagems (Guerber 199). In one of his capers, he brings the force of time to the immortal refuge of the gods, breaching the wall between two worlds, transgressing

boundaries, and becoming what Lewis Hyde calls, “the creator of [...] threatening contingency” (*Trickster* 97).

Loki therefore adroitly emblemizes the complex raft of elements of contemporary authenticity. What I am calling the Lokiist-authentic transposes the connotations of the authentic into the slippery capriciousness of exchange-value culture and the self-estrangement therein. There is almost a concision in the suggestive powers evoked by Loki: fire, productivity, intentional mischief and contingency. This last item is important as it points to the manner in which coordinates of “the authentic” move. It is not that 1950s man is not interested in distinction any less than his 60s progeny. It’s just the affectations that change. Retrospect demonstrates that Robert Plant’s Adonis pretensions are no less mannered than Johnny Cash’s stoic, cowboy footsoldier for god, strung out on speed. Or to put it another, equally contrastive way, Yves Klein’s cool fashion mensch persona is about as far as you can get from the sutured face and scourged flesh of Viennese Actionist Günter Brus. The Lokiist-authentic is that which is shored up as invidious predation, empowered by the General Intellect and, finally, given a sheen of weight and significance by the abyss-artistry-redeemer compact.

## Chapter 3

### Authenticity Jumps the Shark & Concerned Abyss-Redeemers tune-in to all Its Reruns

Commodification provides options for cultural and artistic producers. [...] This ability for creative producers to use culture to produce diverse types of creativity also establishes interdependent relationships across industries, for collaboration, resources, commodification, *and certification of their creativity.*

-- Elizabeth Currid, *The Warhol Economy*, 2007, emphasis added

The work of imagination as a “space of contestation” plays a fundamental role in the agency of TM, whose work often consists of creative, short-live interventions that trouble commonly held beliefs about art, politics, and every day life.

-- Alessandra Renzi, “The Space of Tactical Media,” 2008

*Can business help render authenticity in a world where reality itself seems socially constructed?*

Certainly. But it means intentionally offsetting the lost sense of objective reality thrust on us by postmodernists with an understanding of difference between what *is* real and what we *perceive* to be real.

-- James Gilmore & B. Joseph Pine III, *What Consumers Really Want: Authenticity*, 2007

#### A. Authenticity fully Transmogrifies into its Lokiist variant and We all have a Chuckle or Two

A sure signal that authenticity is, in fact, manifest as Lokiist, is the mushrooming interest of capital in tapping its productive and desirable aspects. A quick examination of some recent business literature makes explicit what denizens of the counterculture prefer to perceive as a sly and covert sentiment and spirit, resultant from their discerning rejection of the status quo lifeworld. James Gilmore and Joseph Pine’s *What Consumer’s*

Really *Want: Authenticity* (published by Harvard Business School Press) discusses authenticity as “the new business imperative” (1). The dust jacket promises to divulge the secret coordinates of the authentic to aspiring entrepreneurs: “It’s a paradox of today’s Experience Economy: the more contrived the world seems, the more we all demand what’s real. As reality is qualified, altered, and commercialized, consumer’s respond to what is engaging, personal, memorable -- and above all, authentic. If customers don’t view your offerings as real, you’ll be branded inauthentic -- fake! -- and risk losing sales.” *The Soul of the New Consumer: Authenticity, What we Buy and Why in the New Economy* by David Lewis and Darren Bridger carries this reassuring tag on its back: “Win the attention, time and trust of new consumers by giving their souls control.” Profits can be made while consumers’ souls are given license to *finally* have their say; it’s a win win situation. Rohit Bhargava highlights a central motif of his triumphant business acumen with the highlighted statement, placed prominently in the middle of the page, in *Personality not Included: Why Companies Lose their Authenticity - And How Great Brands get it Back*, “Personality is the unique, authentic, and talkable soul of your brand that people can get passionate about” (6). Further, this literature is not written in a Machiavellian register -- like the advertising literature coincident with the social reality of the 60s, eager to shuck the dreary and ossifying conservatism of “rules” and “conformity,” business literature about authenticity seeks to capitalize on the burgeoning desire for *genuine* objects and experiences so as to harmonize with the exciting upturn in appetites for the authentic. It *genuinely* wants in on the action, which it appears to perceive as mutually liberating for both entrepreneur and consumer.

This development is the natural evolution in the commodification of “experience,” which began to make its presence felt, in business literature, about a decade ago. Although the language used is occasionally sinister, it is, perhaps unsurprisingly, given capital’s happy accommodation of perpetual flux, seemingly earnest in its zeal for capitalizing on new frontiers in human development and behaviour. Jeremy Rifkin discusses the somewhat astonishing business term “Lifetime Value” (LTV) in 2000’s *The Age of Access: How the Shift from Ownership to Access is Transforming Capitalism*:

The top fifth of the world’s population now spends almost as much of its income accessing cultural experiences as on buying manufactured goods and basic services. We are making the transition into what economists call an “experience economy” -- a world in which each person’s own life becomes, in effect, a commercial market. In business circles, the new operative term is “Lifetime Value” (LTV) of the customer, the theoretical measure of how much a human being is worth if every moment of his or her life were to be commodified in one form or another in the commercial sphere. In the new era, people purchase their very existence in small commercial segments. (7-8)

It is difficult to not see how this state of affairs is attached to the ascension of the General Intellect: social life exists at the level of productive logics, which transpose life experience into the public arena created by “networks of living cognitive labor.” Commodified “experience” is predicated on “access,” which is simply a metaphor for being “plugged in.”

What the business literature misses, of course, is that the exciting ascension of experience economies and the seeming ability of capitalists to make their marketing cohere with the “soulful” authenticity of their consumer’s desires does not attest to liberation in the circuit of production, but rather the opposite. The estrangement built-in to commodity fetishism works double time under the conditions of the General Intellect: the psychosocial reconfiguration wrought by sociality belonging to the productivity of abstract knowledge and machinic assemblages means that estrangement exists at the level of deliberation and debate, the very level which (however falsely) used to promise relief, or at least a modicum of agency, in a commodified lifeworld. Therefore the uptick in business writing on authenticity is symptomatic of a real yearning for authenticity resultant from the very alienation wrought by the enterprise of commodified experience. This is the Lokiist-authentic, here manifest as the natural outgrowth of the rebel consumerism of the 60s. It is a rational desire for restless assertions of the singularity of self and arguably helps account for the oddly desperate reiterative self-affirmation that comprises the twitter-scape and social media environs, wherein manifest striving for Lokiist-authenticity plays out as invidious comparison of digital selfhood seemingly gauged by incessant activity. This activity is comprised of personal observances, which double as bids for recognition, creating an ever-increasing profusion (“I have 800 facebook friends, hardwired to my “wall” updates, which are routed through my twitter account, where I enjoy the attention of 900 followers!”).

It also accounts for the further boosting and slight refiguring of abyss-artistry and -redemption. Abyss-redemption, remember, thrives on playing accomplice to the

liberal sphere's injunction to celebrate and explicate transgression (so as to cover for its simultaneous toleration of inequality). The abyss-redeemer resides in the "saving office of the commentator, the critic who can interpret [...] irony's social value" (Durham Peters 7). This relationship is still easy to see in, say, such productions as British author Tom McCarthy's neo-avant-gardist collective, *International Necronautical Society (INS)*,<sup>35</sup> which takes the self-reflexivity of the modernist avant-gardes to enigmatic and knowing heights of ironic and tongue-in-cheek bravado. Announcing themselves via a manifesto published in the advertising section of the London *Times*,<sup>36</sup> the INS enjoys a mock-serious playfulness, wherein the participants endow themselves with sobriquets echoing the offices of communist regimes and the earnestness of the early avant-garde movements. McCarthy himself is "General Secretary." Simon Critchley is "Philosopher in Chief." Anthony Auerbach is "Chief of Propaganda (Archiving and Epistemological Critique)." They have performed expulsions, again, evoking the famous excommunications of communist regimes and antecedent avant-garde movements. Their performance pieces, theoretical writings and manifestos are all stitched together by a commitment to oblivion, a gleeful embrace of *thanatos*, as a strategy of liberation from the impending demise of the world (hence the term "necronautic" in their name). Their work exploits the idea of networked art and literature, the post-structuralist "textual" author, and burgeoning technological possibilities. It is a heady brew and has attracted the

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<sup>35</sup> See [www.necronauts.org/index.htm](http://www.necronauts.org/index.htm)

<sup>36</sup> 14 December 1999: *The Times*, London, p. 1.

attention of reams of abyss-redeemers.<sup>37</sup> That abyss-redemption would find such offerings alluring is unsurprising. The INS is a pitch-perfect example of oppositional cultural production in the age of the General Intellect: Its insincerity, in marked contrast to its avant-garde predecessors, is a mark of its Lokiist-authenticity. Earnestness itself, under the conditions of the General Intellect, carry a demerit of guacheness. A transvaluation of what we commonly associate with sincerity is here enacted: authenticity, under Lokiist-authentic aesthetics, is not forthright; rather its inverted form of indirection is granted prestige. It is as if recognition of the public sphere's absorption into the circuit of production itself spoils the game. Wry and oblique gestures carry the day and, indeed, do appear to exhibit a particular energy. The parodic and mocking is, after all, a register highly attuned to the caprices of artifice. Shorn of the seemingly fallow projects of the avant-garde of the traditional left, productions that have nothing to lose can harness an effervescence and verve that eludes the humourlessness of strident oppositional culture. Cultural resistance here learns to play the game. The game is rigged, it seems to say; let's calm down and have a drink. The INS then is a match made in heaven for the abyss-artist-redeemer compact.

Where abyss redemption is slightly reconfigured, however, is in the production of tactical media (discussed in Chapter 1). Where the INS may give us an example of oppositional production in the age of the General Intellect, TM is arguably the errant child of the General Intellect. But unlike capital's authenticity mongers, it is critical of the

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<sup>37</sup> See "A Hearing on the Activities of the International Necronautical Society, with Tom McCarthy and Simon Critchley," *Cabinet Magazine*, Sept 2010, <<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/events/mccarthy.php>> and "Meeting the International Necronautical Society," *ForteanTimes*, July 2002, <[http://www.forteanimes.com/features/articles/239/meeting\\_the\\_international\\_necronautical\\_society.html](http://www.forteanimes.com/features/articles/239/meeting_the_international_necronautical_society.html)>

social conditions resultant from the productive logics of the General Intellect. It too, however, is a shepherd of the Lokiist-authentic, as we will see. Tactical media is the photographic negative of authenticity as a business -- it sees as liberatory the fact that its ontology and expression belong to, and are promulgated on the circuits of, the public sphere of networked capital. Harnessing this power in a bottom-up capacity, it maintains, allows for fire to be fought with fire. It is here that the explicitly political dimension of oppositional culture must be countenanced, for it is here that we see abyss-redemption at its most galling, lending invidious stock to otherwise etiolated cultural criticism in the wake of the failure of the New Left.

### **B. Tactical Media: “Alterity” Returns, Stronger and Faster than Ever Before**

Upon a moment’s reflection, it is clear that invidious comparison drives cycles of consumption and so, counter the desires of its practitioners inclined to cultural resistance, it aids and abets consumer capitalism. In any large, urban center, this is painfully obvious, as “alt” trends have long ago passed the rubicon into mainstream acceptance and ubiquitousness. In the city where I reside, I have recently seen ads for *Bulldog* Vodka, in the form of small billboards on the walls of the subway system, that seem to emblemize the peculiar contradiction at the heart of commercial paeans to cultural obstreperousness. Blazoned beneath a portrait of a young, white James Dean lookalike, reads the tag: “Defiance Never Tasted so Good.” There is a collective suspension of disbelief at work in the reception of this ad. But, as the foregoing chapters attest, the conditions wherein such a dissonant image can be easily interpreted by an average viewer have been gestating for

decades. This species of insight begins to border on prosaic. Even the most mainstream news sources now frequently comment on the self-evident fact that oppositional cultural production is *popular* cultural production.<sup>38</sup> Where this selfsame tension is less visible, however, is in the *update* of the 1960s radical. I believe that Tactical Media perpetrates this gaffe. As discussed in Chapter 1, TM arose in a particular set of historical and political conditions. To reflect on the mechanisms whereby TM reiterates older oppositional maneuvers and the division of communicative labour which enables this state of affairs, it is necessary to quickly consider TM's origins.

A recent article on *Dissent* magazine's website<sup>39</sup> posits the post-New Left existence of an "anti-intellectualism that manifested itself in a rejection of "grand narratives" and structural critiques of capitalism, abhorrence for the traditional forms of left-wing organization, a localist impulse, and an individualistic tendency to conflate lifestyle choices with political action." This statement points to the enervation of the left resulting from the ascension of Thatcherism/Reaganism and the fall of "actually existing socialism." The organizational strategies of the left changed dramatically in accord with the left's marginalization in the 1980s. The left's disillusionment with mass politics may be an old story, but the organizational (or disorganizing) processes this disillusionment wrought is often not charted properly. A key element is sometimes glossed over; that is, that the left's continued struggle, which turned its focus to resistance in reception and quotidian defiances, in many ways simply recapitulated the tired cliché of personal

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<sup>38</sup> See "From Warhol to Murakami: pop art hasn't lost its soul, it's selling it," *The Guardian*, 9 Feb 2012; "Diego Rivera at MoMA Makes Us Ask, What Happened to the Radical Left in Art?," *Huffington Post Blog*, 18 Nov 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Sunkara, Bhaskar. "The Anarcho-Liberal," *Dissent: Arguing the World*. 27 Sept 2011.

politics. The standard charting of the left in retreat resides in the two-pronged explanation which saw 80s/90s activist circles delve further and further into a politics of individual “conscience” whilst the ivory tower became enamored of biopower, difference, identity politics and the location of agency in the act of reception. In both instances, micropolitics eclipsed macro. Concurrent with these changes in scholarly and activist circles was the rise of the internet and the advent of “globalization.” Both the internet, the technological scaffolding for the “global village,” and its substructure, globalizing logics, extended tremendous pressures on social formations the world over. The effect of these developments were, as they say, “game changers.” Globalization, the global triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism, twinned with technological apparatuses rendering communication instantaneous, had a profound double effect on the left: The end-of-history narratives of globalization seemed so daunting as to throw avenues of resistance for a loop, while the networking enabled by the internet seemed to proffer the possibility of new collectivities, subjectivities and forms of resistance. But conceptions of the organizational possibilities engendered by the latter carried with them anxieties wrought by the former.

Although the term “Tactical Media” may, in fact, be unfamiliar to some of its practitioners, its ethos and freight are in evidence in bookstores, classrooms, activist canteens, and artist co-ops. And doubly so a decade ago. The phenomenon arose in late 80s/early 90s, unnamed, in the unholy union of techno-anarcho utopians (emblemized by the works of R. U. Sirius, the triumphalist techno-fetishist spirit of *Mondo 2000*, and the brashness of industrial avant-garde) and the ascendant mode of political pranking

dubbed “culture jamming” (*Adbusters* and anti-advertising/anti-consumerist sentiment). In both instances there is an enthusiasm for technology, tacticality, and autonomism. And again, in both instances micro-politics replace the macro. These were movements more preoccupied with stealth and speed than with the lumbering political processes of yesteryear. And there were antecedent cogitations with which these new forms of oppositional spirit could be traced and theorized. In particular, a chapter from Michel de Certeau’s *The Practise of Everyday Life*, published in 1984, titled “‘Making Do’: Uses and Tactics” provided aspirant Tactical Media practitioners with theoretical flourishes and critical heft. Of particular interest was de Certeau’s distinction between “tactics” and strategies.” Divorced from de Certeau’s considerably dense text, the distinction between the two could be rendered thus: Tactics are the rapidly deployed practices of the guerilla, the immigrant, the powerless. They are the resort of the cultural consumer who has no place of her own. Strategies, meanwhile, are the domain of dominative institutional powers, of technical and scientific rationality. A key distinction here is that strategies enjoy dominion over a “propre,” which is best conceived of as a subordinating power over space (and time) (de Certeau xix). Tactics, then, are always making incursions into “strategically” dominated areas. There they can momentarily disrupt strategic plans and/or carve out momentary autonomous space. Consequently, a tactical political project must be ephemeral. It must also think in terms of small units, not the large bodies, of, say, electoral politics. It is the sort of perspective which lends itself to concepts like Work Theft, of which de Certeau, indeed, is an advocate.

It is easy to see how the alluring schema applied to TM can overlay a multiplicity of activities and lend them a credibility they might not otherwise have. It is the sort of conception that can make activism and artistic protest fun (not such a bad thing!). It has sass. It has verve. And it appears to have allowed for the temporary disavowal of neoliberal global domination. TM interventions began to be understood as the oppositional form du jour. And why not? Tactical media is understood to be dynamic, playful, vigorous, colorful, and, perhaps most importantly, as discussed in Chapter 1, manifold. From Culture Jamming to internet and surveillance art to remix culture to internet activism, tactical media interventions, in their many forms, are understood to harness the power of prank, of jouissance, of a spirited subversion that promises to wake us modern myrmidons from the hebetude and subjugation of late capitalism. Whether de Certeau would consent to his work being marshaled in this way is debatable. In fact, it is fair to say that the most we could likely pull out of de Certeau's writings before willfully misreading him is a conception of resistance as anodyne, not as a prescription for a countercultural compass, a political movement or the underwriting of the activist playbook. And it should go without saying that I am not suggesting some monocausal explanation for the anemia of the left with de Certeau as the loadstar. But, whether retroactively or not, *The Practise of Everyday Life* serves as a kind of urtext for tacticality. And, as we can now see, features of tacticality informed much of the political project of the 90s; above all, the penchant for provisionality and subversion. Moreover, it was the object around which an entire industry of abyss-redemption was centred. It is worth thumbing through any old *Adbusters* from around this time to throw this fact into sharp

relief. Calls to become “meme warriors” and “anti-branding activists” are interwoven with discussions of “mind pollution,” “guerrilla semiotics” and discussions of the power of partying for such endgames as temporary reclamation of public space. It is not that these strategems and concerns are worthless. The problem is that tacticality recasts what should be means into ends. In retrospect, it seems like what happened was that the least effective part of the 60s American variant of the New Left, i.e., its lifestyle-as-politics, get-your-freak-on individualism, was reanimated and divorced from its more effective elements, i.e., galvanizing vast swaths of the population to engage with, and activate on behalf of, goals set by the likes of the Civil Rights Movement and the feminist movement.

The persistence of 60s individualism seems curious. Most other facets of countercultural currents of the 60s appear hopelessly dated. However, if, as the foregoing has repeatedly stressed, invidious comparison often comes to bear on expressions of alterity and emancipatory projects, then the through-line between 60s individualism and TM makes more sense. There are few territories less fecund than the 1960s for fealty to individuation as a political act. Moreover, its reanimation is covered by its refraction through the economic reality of contemporary capitalism. When TM is perceived of as a part and parcel of neoliberalism itself, that is, as a sort of dialectical double, its endurance makes more sense. Tactical Media’s “nomadic agency” does, it so happens, mirror the neoliberal project, which is characterized by “extreme dynamism, mobility of practice, responsiveness to contingencies and strategic entanglements with politics” (Ong 3).

### **C. The General Intellect and “Post-National” Politics**

TM’s artful guile, then, is not unreasonably thought to be the only feasible counter to the ambulatory ubiquity of neoliberalism. It carries with it nothing of the bulky, party-based structures of the old left. And furthermore, it facilitates greater digital interplay and so cashes in on already extant enthusiasm for electronic linkage, global counterculture and “networking” writ large. Jeffrey Juris, who was “embedded” for years with anti-globalization activists, and whose writing champions networked activism, explicitly demarcates tactical organization from the dreary plodding of the old left:

While the command-oriented logic of leftist parties and unions is based on recruiting new members, developing unified strategies, political representation through vertical structures, and the pursuit of political hegemony, networked-based politics involve the creation of broad umbrella spaces, where diverse organizations, collectives, and networks converge around common hallmarks, while preserving their autonomy and specificity. (199)

Geographical distance was no obstacle to the growing digital networks that began to proclaim a new politics of “rhizomatic” and horizontally organized multitudes. For these reasons, TM was marshaled in many different quarters and its ethos was thought to underwrite the disparate and multitudinous elements of (a perhaps self-styled) global civil society. Indeed, the case has been made that the Seattle protests themselves qualify as an example of Tactical Media due to their “hit-and-run” mobility, flexibility, and improvised and collective coordination (Bruns 85). But this civil society, a stamp of the public sphere

in late capitalism, belongs more to the productive logics of the General Intellect than it does to traditional conceptions of the liberal public sphere. The “movement of movements” as the most visible purveyors of TM are often called -- i.e., the “anti-globalization movement” -- enact, at their best, vibrant clarion calls for systemic change and collective emancipation. At their worst, however, they are expressions of invidious comparison, predicated on invocations of the Lokiist-authentic. (They are, in either case, expressions of their age). Their tendency to eschew common platform out of respect for multifarious nonconformity is a notion of freedom borrowed from marketplace liberalism’s conception of atomised social fabrics and enshrined in digital culture. Needless to say, the aftermath of the “anti-globalization” demonstrations — to say nothing of the anti-Iraq war protests of 2003, which constituted the largest demonstrations in the history of the world — was decidedly anti-climatic.

Because TM’s allure is located in its dynamism and seemingly limitless potential it carries with it anxieties, manifest in its own organizational forms, which forecloses on its efficacy:

behind the appealing lightness and optimism of TM looms real ‘end of history’ despair about the failure of past revolutionary struggles and experiments and the impossibility of any ‘outside’ to capitalism. In a world without heroic visions or alternatives, the art of everyday resistance seemed preferable to the methodological work of building sustained opposition only to wind up with a new boss, the same as the old boss. (Ray & Sholette 520).

Unfortunately, TM's rejection of the hoary organizing strictures and appeals to grand narratives of the old left, while allowing for micro-political experimentation and versatility, coincide with a "corporate climate that [celebrates] dis-organising the organisation and thinking outside the box, two managerial mantras of neoliberal enterprise culture" (Ray & Sholette 521). But it can hardly be any other way; the very traits that mark late capitalism -- the profusion of "choice," the primacy afforded individuation -- work to amplify the conditions from which invidious comparison is most fertile.

Discussing the political force wielded by anti-globalization activism, political scientist David Chandler points to the presence of "post-territorial" politics. This phenomenon is easy to understand: the opposition to globalizing economic trends necessitated solidarity amongst communities across state borders, just as it contributed to the dismantling of faith in representational politics. This, too, is a reconfiguration of social bonds resulting from the networking of the General Intellect, which replaces the imaginary bonds belonging to enclaves such as the nation-state and repositions them in the circuit of production. Chandler claims, "territorial state-based politics is held to institutionalize the structuring of grand narratives of 'the nation' and to universalize particularist and narrow interests on the basis of those 'inside' and 'outside' the territorial boundary" (*Possibilities*, 116). This facilitates a comprehension of politics whereby it is not understood to be "mediated through the divisive institutions of territorial communities, [but rather] the individual can engage directly in the 'politics of the human,' in the 'global civil society,' or in the struggle against 'power' or

‘empire’” (*Possibilities*, Chandler 116). Chandler notes that these developments have had a profound effect on the way that politics are mobilized:

the decline of territorial political community does not appear to have led to new forms of political community (in territorial or post-territorial forms), but rather to the individuation of ‘being’ political. Therefore ‘being political’ today takes the form of individuated ethical activity in the same way as ‘being religious’ takes a highly personal form with the rejection of organized churches. Being religious and being political are both statements of individual differentiation rather than reflections of social practices and ways of life. (*Possibilities*, 118)

‘Being political’ allows for ones’ personal manner, comportment, stance to mark ones’ discernment and status. It is a bushelful of invidious Lokiist-authenticity and an operative component of most TM enterprise. Again, we see the transmission of 60s radicalism expressed under a different set of cultural constellations. Chandler charts this evolution:

The radical struggle [against traditional political engagement] was shaped by a rejection of the conservative politics of the organized left; particularly in France, where the left (including the Communist Party) supported the war in Algeria, discrediting its claim of representing universal interests. However, rather than dispute the claims of the old left to represent a collective political subject, the new left rejected the existence of collective political interests per se. The resulted, by default, in either a reduction of emancipatory claims to the ‘self-realization’ of the individual [...] or in the

search for subaltern subjects on the margins of society. Instead of the construction of new collectivities, radical consciousness was dominated by a critical approach to organization, a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ which derided mass politics and inevitably reduced political aspirations. (*Below*, 321)

The despair of the post-New Left is almost palpable. However, the abyss-redemption lending the modus operandi of TM a sheen of utility and power is fully *understandable*. There appeared to be few places from which to buttress a program of resistance. Rather than retreating, regrouping, and rallying a new charge, post-New Left abyss-redeemers forged ahead with the materials they were given. That is, the productions of the General Intellect. This stands to reason: there were fêtes to attend, departmental soirees at which to be seen; places at which *something* had to be said to exhibit ones’ cultural sophistication. Consequently, respite was located in the self and in the symbolic gestures belonging to a networked public space.<sup>40</sup> Symbolic politics, Chandler claims, are “highlighted in the increasingly popular framework of ‘raising awareness’ [...] Raising awareness about issues has replaced even the pretense of taking responsibility for engaging with the world — the act is [imagined to be] ethical in itself” (*Possibilities*, 117). Further, “raising awareness” presupposes a secret knowledge on the part of the awareness raiser. It becomes a form of cultural capital. And it is as nebulous an injunction of emancipation as the popular 1960s shibboleth, “free your

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<sup>40</sup> The Facebook “Like” button is a painfully apt case in point.

mind.” It is, at its worst, simply a line demarcating its agents from the tranquilized herds of mass society.

The central problem with the methodology of TM, then, is its ambiguous relationship to the political. Its repeatedly foils its own purported aim of resistance. Chandler, parsing social movements theorist, Alberto Melucci, throws this quandary into sharp relief in a single paragraph:

[Melucci notes that] ‘A new political space is designed beyond the traditional distinction between state and “civil society:” an intermediate public space, whose function is not to institutionalize the movements or to transform them into parties, but to make society hear their messages... while the movements maintain their autonomy.’ This ambiguity is the key to the ‘bottom-up’ ethics of global civil society, understood as a space whereby political movements can make their claims but also maintain their difference and specificity. They become ‘visible’ but are not institutionalized; that is they do not have to make claims to legitimacy based on electoral or financial support. This, in Melucci’s words, is the ‘democracy of everyday life,’ where legitimacy and recognition stem from ‘mere existence’ rather than the power of argument or representation.’ (*Below*, 321)

This must be why Jeffrey Juris, discussing the “open network model,” writes, with unabashed candor, that “collective decisions [are] restricted as much as possible to technical coordination as opposed to abstract political debates, allowing diverse actors to

organize within a common platform” (198). Heaven forbid that political debates come to bear on an explicitly political operations like, say, battling inequity or combating the allegedly popular foe of culture jammers everywhere, the Washington Consensus.

#### **D. Culture Jammin’: Rising above the Crowd**

Underpinning all the considerations heretofore is the running acknowledgement that cultural constellations do not emerge in a vacuum; that there are historical conditions which underwrite their development. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière repeatedly points out that, although cultural production can highlight how society can be remade by allowing the imagining of possibility, outside of a substantial political narrative that can act as bondsman or lend potential surety to such speculations, it becomes deeply troubled. In the absence of a robust left, cultural resistance has embraced a recapitulation of solipsistic alterity, a “resistant” individuation as a form of cultural defiance. On an individual level, it is eminently rational, empowering and vivacious. On a social level, it is toxic, divisive and a pitch-perfect rendering of the zero-sum game which attends cycles of invidious comparison.

“101 Tricks to Play on the Mainstream,” by Tom Liacas, consists of intermittent interviews with self-identified “culture jammers.” The seemingly unconscious elitism of the interviewees is striking. “After culture jamming,” one of them claims, “you can’t go back to being a consumer, grumbling about [corporate] offerings. You’ve become an addicted cultural producer that meets in bars every week with a like-minded gang of

malcontents. Your creations are pranks, public art projects, and guerrilla communications campaigns. You've never felt so powerful, productive and alive" (67).

## Chapter 4

### **Conclusion: Human Stink and Solidarity in a Networked World**

Terry Eagleton has written that "the freedom of the text or language [has] come to compensate for the unfreedom of the system as a whole" (*Postmodernists*, 64). Meanwhile, Jim McGuigan has written that "'cool capitalism' is largely defined by the incorporation, and theory neutralization, of cultural criticism and anti-capitalism into the theory and practice of capitalism itself" (38). These two quotes together account for the most burdensome reading of the power of commodification: On the one hand we have the false freedom of micropolitical gymnastics in the arena of discourse and/or acts of clever signification, while on the other hand we see even these ostensible acts of dissent rendered anemic by a neoliberal subjugation only too happy to collaborate or colonize defiance. If one belabors these considerations one is frozen by crippling cynicism; conversely, one ignores these concerns at one's peril. But, of course, the former can subsume the latter. I feel, therefore, that I should make the claim here that, wherever the foregoing has seemed derisive or cynical, it is not because I harbour contempt for impulses that underlie forms of alterity. I wholly agree with Critical Arts Ensemble member, Steve Kurtz, when he claims that

those elements of society that were once considered superstructural abstractions of the economy that didn't matter, actually *do* matter. They have causal impact in determining how we live, how we behave, and what the structure of society will be in general. So culture becomes an additional major battlefield. How is culture going to be constructed?

Struggles in representation are as significant as struggles for the factories.

Today, in [the] globally developed technosphere, more so than ever. (qtd in *Critical Strategies*)

It is precisely *because* I feel that the impulses that animate attempts to instantiate alterity are so very important that I am of the opinion that critical interrogation of alterity is a necessary component of its health. Which is to say that the search for alterity has a political dimension. Although I do not broach this facet of alternative media's character until the very last chapter, I hope that this is a discernible thread running throughout all the preceding chapters. Although the foregoing is not a historical charting of alternative media and alterity through the evolution of modernity, I have taken care to show, where possible, that the public sphere, wherein gestures of alterity are enacted, emerges from and evolves (or mutates) in, capitalist modernity.

The problem with alternative media or alterity's political dimension is that in its rational desire to simultaneously engage and *evade* domination it arrives in a no man's land from which it does not seem to discern itself clearly. Although I have been at pains to demonstrate this double-bind in the foregoing, it may not be so self-evident as I presuppose. Therefore, I will quickly sketch the movements and motions of alterity that I have attempted to uncover. Because this is easier to see in the instance of strictly artistic practice, my example will refer, counter to my mandate in the foregoing, to alternative media's explicitly *artistic* variants.

The prominence of the translation of act into word -- the ubiquity of critical art's contemporary textual self-explication -- i.e., the collapsing of artist and spectator-critic,

stem from the fact that the public sphere, that in which all artistic interventions are effected, is neither solely rational or discursive, but, as Durham Peters terms it, dependent on the separation of powers between "performance and criticism, action and commentary, drama and critique" (92). That is, abyss-artistry and -redemption. Performance, action and drama might not be wholly reducible to verbal reason, but because politically-engaged art usually does demand a modicum of communicative rationality, some signposts are provided by a work's creator. But the "criticism, commentary and critique" of the artist is always executed in half-measures. The liberal public sphere, domain of absolute freedom of expression, that space which underwrites the dialectic of refusal and incorporation, as discussed above, also maintains a long tradition of avoiding the cognates of the hearth, of the personal. This tension creates an uncertainty which allows for the implicit and the balancing act of indirect commentary and irony, the two most popular modes of oppositional interventions. What I am getting at here is the question of whether or not contemporary oppositional art makes a double-claim. The old Romantic preoccupation with "inspiration" is perhaps as present as ever, despite appearances to the contrary. Inspiration is simply an emblem of authenticity and it is still understood to be bound up with the problem of self-regard and the possibility of eluding self-consciousness (i.e., avoiding being interrupted by the "man from Porlock"). Extemporaneity in the act of creation is understood as "genuine." The use of artistic practice then -- even in those instances where the practice of explanatory cues are absent -- makes claim to the effectiveness of its interventions on the shoulders of its awareness that it is best, in the moment of creation, to eschew self-awareness. That is to say that

much oppositional art can be thought to sneak a rational-critical critique into the public sphere within the trojan horse of artistic creation, by virtue of the fact that creative enterprise carries with it the "authentic" aura of artistic creation. So even when a work is seemingly calculated, planned (and sometimes deliberately duplicitous) -- as with a work which might be involved in hailing the "over-identification" of its spectator -- it is still encoded in an authentic form. This is what "brings it market" in the first instance; it is the reason its appearance in the public sphere is attended by aplomb and poise and demands a particular sort of reception. (Though this is also due to the work of the abyss-redeemer, whom I will address momentarily).

But why would one desire to avoid self-consciousness? What does "self-consciousness" represent that is antithetical to understandings of authenticity? It is because self-consciousness is deliberate and premeditated that it is aware of its complicity with exchange-value culture. It comprises the waking, conscious self that wakes up and brushes its teeth within the oppressive matrix of capitalist modernity. It is the rationalism belonging to behaviour in and of the public sphere. Extemporaneity, meanwhile, seems to proffer a momentary evasion of cultural strictures. It is authenticity by another name. Moreover, the objects of its manufacture can be utilized so as to *signal* the *evasion* instanced in the moment of their creation. This maneuver is a point of egress into a cycle of invidious comparison. We can now back up a tiny bit and return to the above paragraph. In place of "critical art" we can substitute "alterity" (or "abyss-artistry"). No matter what the species of alterity one cares to mention, I would argue that this structure is at play in some capacity. Some accessory, article, comportment or attitude

-- generated via a connection to the authentic -- is conscripted in expressions of alterity to telegraph its wearer's evasion of the mendacity of modernity. (Again, it is from this launching point that cycles of invidious comparison ebb and flow, a sequence marked by the presence of the *arriviste*).

I believe that although anxiety about "authenticity" is perhaps considered a hoary problematic and only apt in arenas where questions of "selling out" might be a concern, it is actually still deeply relevant to oppositional culture. I think it is a mistake to only consider "authentic" and "ersatz" being coordinates for "popular" forms of creative endeavor. We recognize that the desire for the authentic is a factor in the massive upswing of the creative economies of the neoliberal era and that it is a huge component of the Veblenian boom and bust cycle in the marketplace of rebellion (the countercultural ebbs and flows typified by Beat, Hippie, Mod, Punk, Hip Hop, etc). But there is less attention paid to the issues of authenticity at play in the (oftentimes) rarefied milieu of abyss-redemption itself.

A strong feature of Veblen's conception of invidious comparison belonging to a culture of predation is that it quite effortlessly encompasses the critic. Although I believe that status hierarchy is understood to be a tacit given in the arena of cultural mandarins, literary criticism, the ivory tower, etc., it is rarely given quite so unabashed a drubbing as it is through the prism of invidious predation. Not only is this satisfying (to my mind), it is also a relay to the activity of the abyss-redeemer, whose seemingly objective and professional impartiality is actually anything but. There is a thread that runs throughout

the foregoing which attempts to point to the communicative labour which lends credence to acts of transgression and alterity.

The abyss-redeemer is the semi-autonomous agent of the public sphere. S/he works to further perpetuate a liberal conception of freedom, which, as discussed above, happily accommodates the free speech attendant to the “marketplace of ideas.” With surgeon’s gloves and rational reserve, s/he faithfully unpacks the feral and tempestuous products of abyss-artistry (and its cognate of alternative media). That this endeavour belongs to cycles of invidious comparison is a rather unequivocal truism; the vaingloriousness and backbiting of, say, the professoriat needs no preamble. But the trait of this occupation that is perhaps not so obvious and that I have attempted to bring to the fore is the odd complicity of the abyss-redeemer with market liberalism *and* the promulgation of alterity (although, it must be said, the two are far from mutually exclusive!). The abyss-redeemer occupies a peculiar intersection wherein s/he fulfills intended and unintended functions. Apparatchik of a program of publicity which reinscribes liberal notions of freedom, predicated on a faux meritocracy, s/he is *the* agent which brings alterity to market. Simultaneously, her or his dalliance with miscreants of alterity is not a contrivance; her or his attraction to *actus reus* is *genuine*. It is precisely *because* of her or his office as translator and doorkeeper to the public sphere, that which recoups his or her ministrations in the role of abyss-redeemer as commodified product, that s/he feels that s/he can transfigure transgression into socially beneficent nostrums. Further, this conduct points to a desire for the authentic on the part of the abyss-redeemer herself. It is the carrot that

makes delving into the opprobrious world of alterity and the abyss-artist worthwhile. It is the desire for an antidote to the estrangement of exchange-value culture.

But authenticity, in the final analysis, is chimerical. It is not a lie, necessarily, but it is an alibi. It is quicksilver. As discussed above, it emerges in tandem with the “tragedy of modernity.” It is a moving target, metamorphosing with capitalist modernity itself. And it becomes ever more elusive under the coordinates of the General Intellect, where, public commons collapsed into productive logics, the rationalizations and legitimations of the abyss-redeemer become ever more suspect. Authenticity, in such an environment, becomes what I have called Lokiist.

This appears to be a reiteration of yet another totalizing and cynical impasse; there is no evasion of a system which recoups maneuvers of dissent. It forcefully echoes the objections mounted by Walter Benn Michaels and Stephen Knapp in “Against Theory,” noted by Frederic Jameson as

the dilemma of getting out of [a] total system [...] whether the market and capitalism, or the American character and exceptional experience (American culture) -- the power with which the system is theorized outsmarts the local act of judging or resisting it from within, revealing that to have been another feature of the system itself, whether ruse or incest taboo, programmed into it in advance. (204)

However, as Jameson observes, even “total” systems change. Rather than imagining ways in which to “step outside” the system, our attention is better paid to the ways in which the future is already present within our historical moment and the ways in which the

materials of the present can come to bear on the future. This, of course, repeats Marx's oft quoted obstetric metaphor of social change, which I discussed briefly in Chapter 2.

Therefore, as Jameson puts it, an opposite conclusion than one that admits of futility can be drawn:

critiques of consumption and commodification can only be truly radical when they specifically include reflection, not merely on the problem of the market itself, but above all, on the nature of socialism as an alternative system. Unless the possibility of such an alternate system is grappled with and theorized explicitly, then I would agree that the critique of commodification tends fatally to turn back into a merely moral discussion, into mere *Kulturkritik* in the bad sense and a matter of "handwringing." (207)

In the absence of a platform that can play bondsman to the imaginings and longings contained in alterity's gestures, it rapidly becomes enfeebled. Further, it effortlessly manifests the zero-sum game of invidious comparison. But this "alternate system" of socialism that Jameson invokes is strategy by another name. That the ascension of TM has put the binary of tactics vs strategies in the limelight is cause for reflection. And, as noted above, it appears as though TM as it has been deployed in the shadow of the failure of the New Left is, as I write, undergoing a substantial metamorphosis. The development of OWS may simply be a footnote in the history of the twenty-first century. But it is nonetheless bringing conceptions of economic rights, subjectivity, collectivity and political change into a new light. Moreover, it is doing so within the coordinates of the

General Intellect. That this may beneficially reconfigure notions of alterity (and *authenticity!*) is not too remote a possibility.

The abyss-artist, architect of alternative media, makes attempts at trying to sneak emotionality and human stink into the stoic rational-critical arena of the liberal public sphere. This in and of itself is admirable and worthy of approbation. Odorousness is an equalizing agent. It contains an incipient inkling that humankind is a communal being, that the human estate need not be fragmented. Alterity's rejection of oppressive strictures contains embryonic aspirations of inclusivity. But its deployment does not. So long as dissent and cultural resistance are expressed through gestures of alterity, which are burnished by the abyss-redemptive recapitulation of the logics of liberal publicity, wherein society is an aggregate of atomised selves, whose motive force is competition, an action which renders said gestures markers of distinction, the emancipation desired by alterity will be undercut by its own movements.

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