

Are They For Real? Activism and Ironic Identities

Political activists have not historically been known for their fun-loving sense of humor and playfulness. Nor do they have a reputation for communicating in riddles, deliberately speaking the opposite of what they mean. However, as the realities of mass media communication have evolved, so too have the tactics employed by activists for capturing the media spotlight. More and more groups are now building their actions around a playfully ironic sensibility, creating attention-getting stunts, graphics, and slogans, along with pre-packaged media sound-bites. Within this larger trend, one particular tactic involves a form of masquerade, as groups very deliberately assume the identities of their opponents. Rather than straightforward political debate, they communicate via indirection, mimicry, and spectacle. Though their stunts may appear the very antithesis of persuasive political discourse, they are aimed precisely at influencing the direction of public discussion. I argue that the irony is deployed as a means of engendering community, actively calling upon their audiences' shared assumptions and predilections in an attempt to create the feeling of community in opposition, making members of existing discursive communities present to one another, and, ideally turning those communities into actively politicized ones.

Though it is remarkably easy to dismiss political critique aimed at those who may already appreciate the critique as merely "preaching to the converted," it is important to remember that the so-called converted may still be apathetic, or unconnected to a larger movement, or simply in need of some validation. It is my contention that affirmation and reinforcement fulfill an integral

community building function.¹ While the type of efficacy achieved by ironic activists is often less measurable in terms of concrete legislative goals, it is instead located in the strengthening of the visceral experience of community, and in the attempt to slowly shift debate by turning laughter over a shared joke into anger and engagement.

In what follows, I draw on three primary case studies chosen as representative samples of the many groups currently blending irony and activism. The Billionaires for Bush attend protests and other events around the U.S. as exaggerated caricatures of the ultra-rich, ostensibly in support of President Bush and the Republican Party, literally becoming their perceived opponents in an attempt to reframe the terms of debate. The Yes Men further expand this strategy, layering into it the techniques of invisible theatre, rendering the faux identity they have assumed more difficult to immediately recognize as fake. They have engineered multiple large-scale public stunts in which they attend conferences or do television interviews as representatives of companies for which they do not actually work, as a means of drawing scrutiny to the organization's practices, striving to engage and enrage their audience. Finally, Reverend Billy is a persona created by performance artist Bill Talen, a tele-evangelist style preacher at the helm of the Church of Stop Shopping, who stages shopping-interventions and revivals at various retail corporations. The interplay between ironist and addressees becomes particularly visible in his work, which relies on a "congregation" of participants providing the 'Amens' punctuating his sentences and actively working to produce the semi-fictional reality in concert.

¹ This is an idea also explored, in a slightly different vein, by Tim Miller and David Román in their essay "Preaching to the Converted." In response to the critique frequently used to dismiss much queer community theatre as *merely* "preaching to the converted," they argue for the importance of shared events, occasions, and rituals within a community still marginalized within the larger culture, adding further that no community is ever as monolithic as the phrase "the converted" would seem to infer.

In analyzing the poetics of these activist pranks, happenings, and performances, the modes of satire, parody and irony bleed into one another, thwarting efforts to neatly separate them out. Examples of all three are abundant. The Billionaires for Bush, for instance, clearly create exaggerated parodies of Bush's wealthiest supporters, while The Yes Men appear at conferences and on television as officials of companies they don't actually belong to in order to satirize real-world economic policy. However, I most often refer to this type of activism as "ironic," based on Linda Hutcheon's explanation that irony is defined by the simultaneity of both a said and unsaid meaning, "each of which takes on meaning only in relation to the other," (59) as I think it best captures the knowing wink these groups offer to those who already share their views. I rely on Hutcheon's description of irony as "the making or inferring of **meaning** in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an **attitude** toward both the said and the unsaid" (11). More specifically, I focus on a practice I term "identity-nabbing," in which participants pretend to be someone they are not, appearing in public as exaggerated caricatures of their opponents, or ambiguously co-opting some of their power. Members draw on irony to rhetorically head opponents off at the pass, performing their own version of the other side.

The obvious question surrounding this practice is: why would activist groups in particular, who normally depend on making political demands in as clear a voice as possible, want to use such a convoluted mode of discourse? The answer is at least partially to be found in the co-participatory workings of irony that Hutcheon lays out. As she explains, for irony to be present in a given statement requires not only the intention of the ironist but also the intention of the receiver (or audience) to read it as such. In other words, irony is a meaning-making process that must involve both encoding and decoding. For irony to happen, ironist and interpreter have to share certain assumptions, including mutually understood cues (quotation marks, tone of

voice, etc) that mark the utterance, as well as conceptions of what sort of statement is appropriate in a given situation. While many theorists argue that irony creates in-groups (implicitly separating out those who “get it” from those who do not), Hutcheon turns the formulation around to argue that “irony happens because what could be called ‘discursive communities’ already exist and provide the context for both the deployment and attribution of irony” (18). Our membership in existing discursive communities, then, is what makes irony possible.

Notably, her conception of “discursive communities” can be roughly translated as what others might call “publics.” Specifically, if we draw on Michael Warner’s definition of publics as being built on the circulation of discourse, requiring participation (not just demographics) for membership, members of discursive communities *become* publics in choosing to interpret an ironist’s statements ironically. It is my contention that the activist groups profiled here rely on existing discursive communities to understand the irony of what they are doing, but that they also attempt to further turn these discursive communities into actively politicized communities, or counterpublics. Appealing to shared assumptions about the world, as well as, perhaps, a shared sense of humor, they challenge their audience to not only get the joke but to actively take up the issues at hand as their own. This co-participatory element is perhaps even more pronounced in the case of embodied irony, as it involves the bodily engagement of the ironist with addressees, demanding somewhat more of its interpreters. While Hutcheon stresses that irony cannot actively create communities, that they must exist prior to the enunciation, she under-theorizes the potential of making members of existing discursive communities present to one another and of strengthening the visceral experience of community.

Finally, another piece of the puzzle about why activists would choose to speak ironically has to do with their positioning vis a vis the mass media and their potential audience. These

groups are attempting to capture attention that has not already been granted them, often the attention of both passersby and of the news media. Thus, for all of the groups, entertainment value is key to the success of their actions, as, at the very least, it assures they will be noticed. For this reason, the potential pleasure that particular stunts may afford their viewers is a key concern in their design, a pleasure often conceptualized in opposition to the potential displeasure of the straightforwardly didactic.

Of course, the ironic forms of play surveyed here are not, by any stretch of the imagination, the only type of activism operating today, nor the only type necessary to effect social change. However, they have taken on a much more significant and privileged role within activism in recent years. This shift is certainly linked to a more general upsurge of focus on culture within activist communities, meaning that it is no longer an area considered peripheral to the work of organizing, letter writing, or marching. Addressing this larger phenomenon, Stephen Duncombe explains that culture, both as entertainment and information, is one of the leading sectors of the economy, so that “the idea of a performed cultural world seems second nature to us. Add into this mix the Internet, the virtual world of signs and symbols where an increasing amount of our everyday life takes place, and it’s no surprise that activism has embraced culture. Activists have become cultural guerrillas because this is the terrain of the battles they fight” (Cultural 333). Today’s activists are often savvy cultural producers as well as consumers. And it is within this larger context that irony has come to the fore as a type of counter-cultural dominant. Drawing strategically from past performative activist groups such as The Situationists, The Yippies, and ACT UP, the contemporary groups emphasize Do-It-Yourself (DIY) activism and “viral” protest models that are creative and accessible. The ironic hook can

be easily picked up and replicated, used to stoke allegiances and, ideally, to shift the direction of wider public debate.

Culture Jamming

When discussing the use of irony in contemporary activism and oppositional culture, the first concept one must grapple with is the idea of “culture jamming,” which has become a sort of counter-cultural buzzword in recent years. Similar to the Situationists’ practice of “*détournement*,” (which is often referenced as inspiration or as part of the wider jamming legacy) “culture jamming” refers to the re-purposing, deconstructing, or hijacking of mass culture, using the media as a means to critique the media. The term was coined by the band “Negativland,” which became known in the late-1980s through the present for cutting up songs and subverting their original meaning. It was cultural critic Mark Dery, however, who popularized the concept by theorizing its workings in a pamphlet titled “Culture Jamming” in 1993. Dery argues that the purpose of culture jamming is to wage war against commodity culture and its colonization of the mass media – the tyranny of the “empire of signs” (Dery). Culture jamming, he believes, is a form of fighting back via semiological warfare. As he explains, culture jammers “introduce noise into the signal as it passes from transmitter to receiver, encouraging idiosyncratic, unintended interpretations. Intruding on the intruders, they invest ads, newscasts, and other media artifacts with subversive meanings; simultaneously, they decrypt them, rendering their seductions impotent” (Dery). As examples, he lists tactics like billboard banditry, subvertising, media hoaxing, and audio agit-prop.

Billboard alteration groups, for example, target billboard advertisements in public space, altering them to convey a very different meaning than the original, often one that is critical of the

product, the company, or consumer culture in general. Aesthetic styles, strategies, and ideologies vary from group to group, but as Naomi Klein points out, most appear to be united in the belief “that free speech is meaningless if the commercial cacophony has risen to the point that no one can hear you” (284). The intent is to speak back to the ads themselves. A similar philosophy lies behind “subvertising,” the creation of parody ads. Here the magazine Adbusters has become the best known practitioner. Rather than vandalize existing advertisements, it creates its own, using a visual language that mimics the products of any marketing agency. Looking like many other glossy magazines, Adbusters contains articles, essays, and activist information, as well as the ad parodies that have made it famous. For example, one mirrors the style of a popular Obsession perfume campaign, featuring a black-and-white photograph of a young, attractive man in his underwear, though in this version the model is staring into his underpants. The logo “Obsession” and the words “for men” are emblazoned over his image. The Adbusters Media Foundation also started “Buy-Nothing-Day,” observed the day after Thanksgiving in the United States (the heaviest shopping day of the year), and have created several television commercials for it that are regularly turned down by television stations.

There is nothing particularly new or cutting-edge about advertisement parody or viewing popular culture texts ironically, per se; however there is something about the concept of culture jamming that seems to have struck a resonant chord with contemporary generations. As Klein puts it, writing in the year 2000, “though culture jamming is an undercurrent that never dries up entirely, there is no doubt that for the last five years it has been in the midst of a revival, and one focused more on politics than on pranksterism” (No Logo 284). Since we all exist within a media-saturated environment, one in which commercial jingles and slogans are primary facets of our shared culture, it is unsurprising that this same language is what many gravitate toward when

crafting critique of that culture. As Claudia Orenstein argues, precisely because the average individual is a highly sophisticated and skeptical viewer, “today’s activists tend to favor the indirect means of ironic statement to the direct means of didacticism as a way of conveying their messages. Activists now need to master the use of technologies and advertising skills in order to compete with the mainstream media for the public’s attention” (144). But this is also precisely where the potential weakness of culture jamming lies.

One of the critiques consistently leveled at subverters and billboard alterists is that they flirt so closely with corporate culture that they are either indistinguishable from that culture or are too easily co-opted by it. There are numerous examples now of corporations producing their own pre-jammed ads that appear to be graffitied, or television commercials built around ironic anti-advertising slogans. Indeed, when one does a media search for the term “culture jamming,” many of the first instances of its usage in the mainstream press are in advertising and public relations industry publications. Shortly after Kalle Lasn, founder of Adbusters, came out with his book Culture Jam, the magazine Adweek ran a piece on it in which the author assures her readers that “anti-consumers aren’t the enemies of consumerism; they’re its cutting edge” (Goldman). She then goes on to list the qualities for which this particular demographic longs, including authenticity, individuality, and freedom of expression, concluding that Lasn has “tapped into the yearnings from which brand identities of the future – including Lasn’s own – will be made” (Goldman). That is not to say that advertisers have been entirely successful at swallowing and repackaging culture jamming, but it is telling that the industry views the aesthetic as potentially another wing of its own house.

This happens to be particularly ironic in Lasn’s case, as he is decidedly preachy about the revolutionary power of the culture jamming movement, proclaiming: “our aim is to topple

existing power structures and forge major adjustments to the way we will live in the twenty-first century (xi). He depicts culture jammers as media activists locked in battle against “The Corporate Cool Machine” (xvi), arguing “it is not inconceivable that the culture jamming movement will be remembered by our grandchildren for having been one of the catalysts of the great planetary transformation that shook the world in the early years of the new millennium” (135-6). It is hyperbolic language such as this, of course, which can make culture jamming easy to dismiss. Lasn, in particular, foments against cultural homogenization, corporate wrong-doing, consumerism and ecological destruction, amongst other issues, without clearly explaining how culture jamming can help solve these problems. His targets appear diffuse or grandiose, while the proposed actions seem small. In Christine Harold’s analysis of anti-corporate activism, she critiques Adbusters for being stuck in negative reaction that encourages simply “saying no” to the seductions of consumer culture, without affirming possible alternatives. The result, as she puts it, is that “the nay-sayer is, in essence, yoked in a dialectic tug-of-war with the rhetoric it negates,” (57) without offering a new locus for the desires the market currently seems to satisfy.

However, there are numerous other culture jamming practices that draw from a similar spirit of playful, media-savvy, humorous critique, many of which reach beyond Adbusters’ “asceticism” (Harold). Many tap directly into a spirit of carnivalesque pleasure amidst transgression, such as the group Reclaim the Streets, which communicates its point about the disappearance of public space by temporarily seizing busy streets for the creation of impromptu dance parties. Numerous RTS factions around the world have replicated the original model developed in London, always adding their own local creative touches. Other examples include the proliferation of groups organizing pie-ings of morally suspect public figures, the recent popularity of radical marching bands, the earlier mediagenic stunts and posters of the Guerrilla

Girls, and the antics of newer organizations like the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army. All are gesturing toward the progressive versions of spectacle called for by Stephen Duncombe, a politics that understands desire, fantasy, and pleasure (Duncombe, Dream 9). It is within this growing movement of affect-based activism with a sense of humor that we find the specific tactic of identity-nabbing, one which draws on irony as a means of re-framing (or re-branding) political opponents, while actively connecting to those who already share many of the group's values, entertaining and engaging these potential allies. Identity-nabbing can be seen as part of the larger culture jamming project, but an incarnation that is aimed specifically at co-participatory communication between ironist and audience.

The Identity-Nab

The Billionaires for Bush provide a good illustration of the "identity nab." Originally titled the "Billionaires for Bush (or Gore)," the concept was developed in the lead-up to the U.S. presidential election of 2000 in order to draw attention to the influence of big money on politics. Since Bush won the presidency, they have focused on the policies of his administration that they believe are good for the wealthy but bad for everyone else, and actively worked against his re-election in 2004. Their formula is fairly straightforward; members dress up in tuxedos and top hats, fake furs and evening gowns, and assume double-entendre fake names such as Meg A. Bucks, Tex Shelter, or Ava Rice. In their original incarnation, they created candidate product comparison charts and campaign contribution return-on-your-investment analysis, appearing at events with signs reading "We're paying for America's free elections so you don't have to" or "Free the Forbes 400" (Boyd, "Truth is a Virus" 371). Newer slogans include "Leave No Billionaire Behind," "Make Social Security Neither," and "Tax Work Not Wealth" (Billionaires,

“Do-It-Yourself Manual” 28). Typically, members of the group appear at events such as Republican campaign rallies, or Bush policy speeches, showing up to ostensibly thank him for not pandering to the special interests of everyday Americans, or at anti-Bush events as feigned counter-demonstrators. Local chapters of the Billionaires have additionally organized the Million Billionaire march, the auctioning off of the Liberty Bell, and vigils for corporate welfare, as well as stunts like listing Social Security for sale on the Internet auction site Ebay.

Part of the strategy is what Carol Burbank refers to as “othering the opposition” (26), marking one’s enemies with essentialist, larger-than-life accusations. The Billionaires for Bush try to actively link images of corporate greed and vast wealth disparities with particular politicians. The aim is to reframe the terms of political debate. If campaign financing, ties to particular corporations, or budget deficits are not primary topics within mainstream reportage (or are being inadequately framed), the Billionaires attempt to reinsert them into public dialogue via media coverage of the group’s appearances.

The gimmick of the Billionaires’ identity-nabbing technique was expressly developed with maximum media amplification of the issues in mind. Andrew Boyd, one of the original founders of the group, also known as Phil T. Rich, explains his thinking in terms of “viruses” and what he refers to as “meme warfare,” arguing that “memes are media viruses that spread throughout the population. Think of urban legends, fleeting fashions, and idiotic ad slogans that work their way into everyday conversations; these are memes. But memes can also be used as a culture of resistance” (“Irony” 369). With this in mind, the intention behind The Billionaires model was “to create a humorous, ironic media campaign that would spread like a virus via grassroots activists and the mainstream media” (370). The formula is deliberately easy to follow. Anyone wishing to start up their own chapter is encouraged to do so by downloading templates

for signs and suggestions for slogans, costuming, and major talking-points. The idea was to create an easy Do-It-Yourself model that could accommodate local inventiveness while still ensuring that everyone would remain relatively on-message. In fact, the model is now adapted to attack other targets, as in the case of the Billionaires for Tar Sands group protesting the environmental impacts of processing oil in the Alberta, Canada tar sands. The Billionaires' concept creates a much more interesting angle for reporters than simply relaying the number of protesters present at a particular event, resulting in a great deal of coverage. And while the media can report on the Billionaires' presence at an event with apparent neutrality or detached amusement, the critique is still implicit.

The ironic identity-nabbing technique sets up a unique relationship between activists and audience, so that, for people to find the joke amusing and worth repeating, or worthy of reportage, they must participate in the meaning making process, sharing in many of the group's assumptions. In other words, they must take part in the co-participatory construction of the event in question. As Orenstein points out, for many, "the lesson is not so much news as a reminder or an affirmation of what they already suspect." For those familiar with the criticism that the Bush administration is in the pocket of big-money, it is easy to discern what the intended unsaid meaning is of the ironic posturing. The political point is clearly targeted, while the humor provides the satisfying wink to the audience. The aim is to communicate with existing discursive communities who get the joke and appreciate the critique, while amplifying that critique via the mass media. As Duncombe writes about his experience in groups like the Billionaires, as well as Students for an Undemocratic Society, and Loan Sharks (at International Monetary Fund events), irony served as a tool for participation and interaction, as "irony only works in so far as people 'get it,' actively constructing a counter message and idea in their own mind. In other words, we

were creating a symbol of the world that we wanted to create, but one that only appeared if other people entered into our joke” (“Stepping Off” 228). Part of the attraction for onlookers is the feeling that they are in on the joke by understanding the unsaid meaning.

This idea gets more complicated, however, when the irony employed is so subtle, or the identity-nab so convincing that the audience becomes entirely taken in. Here a group known as The Yes Men provide a particularly interesting example in that they deliberately court confusion, attempting to truly “pass” in their assumed identities. The group developed out of @TMark (pronounced “artmark”), a sort-of brokerage firm that trades in corporate subversion, linking prank ideas on its website and encouraging those with either funds to support the stunt or the ability to carry it out to meet up. The Yes Men project began with several parody websites: GWBush.com which mirrored George W. Bush’s official site (GeorgeWBush.com) while he was ramping up his first campaign for president, and GATT.org which mimicked the World Trade Organization’s homepage. Both were sophisticated parodies that almost identically copied the originals. Rather than presenting themselves as obvious or over-the-top spoofs, these sites employed language that, for the most part, could plausibly be found on the legitimate web-pages. However, the content was dryly satiric. To the surprise of the site’s creators, they were contacted by officials from other organizations who had not noticed that the WTO site was a fake, and were invited (as WTO employees) to speak at several international conferences.

Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum (both pseudonyms) then began publicly speaking on behalf of the WTO by creating presentations they felt more honestly represented the organization, many of which are chronicled in a documentary and book account, both titled The Yes Men. At their first conference on international trade, for example, Bichlbaum lectured on trade regulation relaxation, explaining that the European Union was endangering competition by

striving to keep “violent bananas” grown in oppressive conditions out of their market, and later concluding with an endorsement for a system called “vote auction,” in which voters may auction their vote to the highest bidder (Bichlbaum 39). Shortly thereafter, they seized on an opportunity to represent the WTO in a televised debate on CNBC in the lead-up to the 2001 G-8 summit in Genoa. In the interview, Bichlbaum (as the fictional Granwyth Hulatberi) ostensibly defends global trade practices in light of widely anticipated protests surrounding the summit. When questioned on the protesters’ argument that international trade policies have led to increasing global inequality, he replies that the protesters “are simply too focused on reality, and on facts and figures. There’s an enormous number of experts at all the greatest universities in the world, who have read all these books, who have read Adam Smith and everything since it to Milton Friedman, and these people have solid theoretical basis for knowing that things will lead to betterment” (Bichlbaum et al 59).

While groups like the Billionaires for Bush take on false personas, perhaps encouraging some initial confusion over who they are, the over-the-top slogans and blunt language the group employs are intended to be read wholly ironically. The Yes Men, on the other hand, are more slippery, deliberately courting confusion and even flirting with fraud. They call their technique “identity correction,” which they explain is what happens when “honest people impersonate big time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them” (The Yes Men). Their belief is that they are merely taking their adversaries’ positions to their logical extreme, pushing the neo-liberal market philosophy of the WTO, for example, only slightly further than the organization itself. In an interview, Frank Guerrero (the ®™Mark pseudonym for the person also known as Mike Bonanno) explains:

The Yes Men use affirmation to make their point. It is an unusual rhetorical strategy, almost a reverse-psychology approach. Instead of debating their opponents, they assume their opponents' identities and enthusiastically affirm their adversaries' beliefs. It's an unorthodox approach, but hardly new or original. In fact, I think something like Swift's 'Modest Proposal' also falls into this category, in a sense. (Myerson 30)

Though there is clearly a link between the Yes Men's practices and Swift's satiric proposals, the difference is that the Yes Men appear in public in their assumed identities, directly confronting their audience with what they believe to be wildly offensive ideas. The intent is both to confuse and to enrage. In interview after interview, they explain that they hope to make people question the rhetoric used by real officials with real power and to take a closer look at the philosophy underlying their actions.

To their surprise, however, it ends up being much harder to shake people up than they had expected. When their audiences took everything they had to say without offence, they upped the ante, appearing at one conference in a gold lamé "management leisure suit," complete with an inflatable phallus with a T.V. screen at the end of it with which to monitor workers. When even ridiculous presentations failed to rankle, the Yes Men began following stunts with press releases, receiving significant media attention after the fact. They also changed tactics. For instance, on the twentieth anniversary of the Union Carbide explosion in Bhopal, India, they appeared in an on-camera interview with the BBC as representatives of Dow Chemical (via media enquiries to another fake website). Instead of actively making Dow look reprehensible, they took the opportunity to announce that after twenty years of denying responsibility, Dow would liquidate Union Carbide and spend the money to clean up the site and compensate the

victims. Of course, Dow was doing no such thing, but they took two hours to retract the story, attracting a flurry of media reports, which brought the almost forgotten issue back under scrutiny.

Much of the British press, in particular, castigated The Yes Men for falsely raising the hopes of the Bhopal victims, arguing that while the stunt may have been funny on paper, it was “not so funny for those Indians who, for several hours, believed that 20 years of mistreatment and suffering were coming to an end” (Time Out 71). The Yes Men argue, however, that their aim was to push the Bhopal disaster and the ongoing environmental contamination back into the news, explaining, “In getting the news to these folks, we succeeded wonderfully: hundreds of articles about the event made it into the U.S. press, whereas on most anniversaries of the accident, it hasn't even found its way into *one* mainstream source” (The Yes Men, “FAQ”). For The Yes Men, public discussion (or at least acknowledgement) of the issue is what matters most, and while the statements they made toward that end may have been false, they would likely argue that the denials of culpability and public relations screen Dow has enveloped itself in for twenty years is more perniciously so. The Yes Men's stunts seem to deliberately straddle the line between satire and political dialogue, art and activism, creatively attempting to influence the direction of public discourse, even if that involves a level of fraud.

Hutcheon warns of the potential danger inherent in the use of irony in that it can easily backfire. She explains, “those whom you oppose might attribute no irony and simply take you at your word; or they might make irony happen and thus accuse you of being self-negating, if not self-contradicting. Those with whom you agree (and who know your position) might also attribute no irony and mistake you for advocating what you are in fact criticizing” (16). The Yes Men, it seems, found themselves precisely falling prey to these traps, but have hit upon a method

of using the pitfalls to their advantage, allowing audiences to read them seriously and then exposing them for being complicit with the offensive ideas put forward. In hindsight, the irony is much more obvious, meaning either that those present at the live event appear morally unscrupulous or that the media is spurred to engage in reflection about why they were taken in. Perhaps more importantly, the revealed hoaxes speak to a growing number of fans who take delight in witnessing organizations and corporations they are already critical of be publicly pranked, again providing affirmation for existing discursive communities.

Invisible Theatre and Political Simulacra

The performances the Yes Men give at conferences or in television interviews function as what Jean Baudrillard would call “simulacra:” copies of copies with no original. The pair who act as the group’s public face do not impersonate real officials or attempt to caricature specific mannerisms. Instead, they simply mimic a generalized performance of power and authority, “substituting signs of the real for the real itself” (Baudrillard, Simulations 4). Part of the reason no one challenges their authenticity or even questions their ridiculous presentations is that they have reproduced the signs of officialdom: a clean business suit, a conservative haircut, an air of gravitas and knowledge, and a practiced power-point presentation. It is important to note that this performance is possible for them because they are both recognizably white, male, and middle-class, and therefore not out of context at international conferences or as television spokespeople. One cannot underestimate the power their social positioning already affords them, but they have also worked to funnel that advantage into the production of the signs of knowledge and authority (many of the same signs real WTO officials would employ), deliberately engaging with the “hyperreal.”

Interestingly, however, while Baudrillard characterizes the “precession of simulacra” as profoundly anti-political, working to conceal and naturalize the lack of a real, the Yes Men create simulacra in the pursuit of distinctly political aims, precisely to reveal that lack. Baudrillard points to attractions like Disneyland as functioning to hide the ubiquity of simulacra, arguing “Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America, which *is* Disneyland...Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation” (Simulations 25). Conversely, the Yes Men, attempt to draw attention to the fact that legitimacy is routinely granted to men with business suits and fancy titles, whether their ideas are sound or not, so that their status is predicated solely on these signs of power. The Yes Men’s aim, then, is to draw scrutiny to this system. The end goal is not to prove the nihilist’s version of Baudrillard’s theories, to demonstrate that no one is believable or that nothing is more or less true than anything else; rather, it is to encourage evaluation. They argue, “many, many people, regardless of education, are easy prey for the ideas of the corporate decision-makers. Present them with a decision, they will accept it! This is why it is important for citizens to decide what sorts of corporate decisions are and are not acceptable. It is never possible to count on the highly educated to filter the okay from the rotten” (“FAQ”). Having discovered it was difficult to offend their immediate audiences with what they believed to be free-market fanaticism taken to grotesque extremes, their method now involves shaming those present and drawing attention to their issues through public reveals of the hoax, sending out their own press-releases to drum up publicity. While they deliberately court confusion (theoretically not the most productive way to make a political point), they rely on the breach of protocol to generate its own explanations and narrative, ensuring the story’s longevity through

mediatized controversy. And it is through the subsequent media coverage that they are able to reach their most important audience, not the bored conference participants, but those out there who already share some of the Yes Men's assumptions and basic moral outlook.

In her discussion of pranking, Harold argues that the strategy is more successful than that of an organization like Adbusters, which seeks primarily to negate, because pranks instead work through amplification and appropriation. Further, she argues, pranks don't depend on the "aha" moment of the audience becoming conscious of a new reality. Though some pranks are followed by explanations, in her opinion, they have nothing to do with the prank itself, and they may even "dilute the rhetorical power of pranks to confuse and provoke. In other words, attaching an explicit argument or making a prank make sense may undermine what is unique about pranking's assignifying rhetoric in the first place" (107). While I would agree that the cleverness of a prank can obviate the need for direct didacticism, I would argue that if it is to have any political or rhetorical effect, it must imply some moderately clear critique, and must indeed flatter its potentially sympathetic audience with the pleasure of "getting it," whether we characterize that as an "aha" moment or not. If it is a self-consciously oppositional action (which the pranks of a group like The Yes Men are), it is implicitly attempting to speak to others within particular discursive communities who will appreciate the critique and who will want to continue circulating its discourse, thereby becoming part of an active counterpublic. While the nuance of what exactly the ironic statement is can certainly depend somewhat on individual readings, the prank must have some fairly clear critical content built into it or risk being nothing more than an exercise in art-student narcissism.

Baudrillard has argued that true "resistance" to the dominant order is nearly impossible, particularly through the mass media, which offer only a one-way flow of speech,

meaning “transgression and subversion never get ‘on the air’ without being subtly negated as they are: transformed into models, neutralized into signs, they are eviscerated of their meaning” (For a Critique 173). However, he does point to graffiti as having an effect, as it interrupts the exchange between transmitter and receiver. Within these terms, we can conceptualize the Yes Men’s brand of culture jamming as a type of graffiti in that they scrawl their own messages over those already existing in public space, not waiting for attention, instead crafting their own hijack. And it is precisely through the creation of simulacra that this is accomplished, as corporate public-relations rhetoric is shaped into corporate condemnation. While Baudrillard sees the proliferation of these copies with no original as self-obfuscating, here the self-conscious creation of simulacra functions as a clear form of critique. And, perhaps, amongst a world of simulacra, it is the only form of critique that is palatable. Rather than un-hip moralizing, this type of media-savvy activism speaks the slick language of popular culture, while ironically bending it to critical use. It is integral, however, that this critique be legible if it is to reach a wider audience and to provoke discussion.

To that end, in producing staged scenes that are not immediately visible as staged, the Yes Men can also be seen as drawing on the technique of “invisible theatre” developed by Augusto Boal, including his aim of sparking public debate. Beginning his work as a theatre practitioner during a period of military rule in Brazil, Boal inherited from Bertolt Brecht a concern for demonstrating that things could be different from the way they are, but is equally interested in engaging spectators in the theatrical action. Rather than presenting the audience with a plot that has already been determined by fate while allowing them to remain passive onlookers, he has sought ways to engage the audience in developing solutions to the problems portrayed, empowering them to not only imagine change but to actually practice that change – to

literally rehearse the revolution (Boal 141). The concept of invisible theatre is one of many techniques he has developed, this one involving spectators who do not know they are witnessing a staged event. An example he gives is of a scene in a restaurant involving several planted customers, one of whom orders and eats an expensive steak. When it comes time to settle his bill, however, he announces that he is broke and can pay only with his labor, prompting an exchange about the high cost of the meal in comparison to the salary of the restaurant employees. Other planted actors offer information about how much the person who takes out the garbage makes, for instance, and that the customer would have to work for ten hours to buy the meal. The loud, public conversation encourages the others in the restaurant (who do not know that they are watching actors) to join in, coming to the support of the diner or of the restaurant or just whispering comments to their dinner companions, but somehow becoming engaged in considering the issue.

A successful invisible theatre performance would involve bringing together people who may not otherwise have had any interaction, but are suddenly united by an issue, transforming them into a momentarily politicized collective. In a similar manner, the Yes Men orchestrate scenes in which only they know that they are following a script, inciting their audience to recognize themselves in the issues and become involved, and attempting to evoke a critical collective response. The difference from Boal becomes one of scale when they manage to achieve mass media engagement, ideally sparking discussion on a national or international level, reminding individuals that they share opinions, beliefs, and even senses of humor with many others.

It is this goal of fostering discussion and engagement that links these groups, and to which the identity-nabbing tactic is aimed. However, the technique need not be used exclusively

to “other” the opposition or lampoon their position. The performance artist/activist known as Reverend Billy, for instance, has a more complex relationship to the character he assumes, borrowing some of that figure’s genuine allure, while still assuming an ironic distance. Bill Talen is his real name, though he has created the persona of Reverend Billy, a bouffant-haired, booming-voiced, Jimmy-Swaggart-style preacher, who presides over the Church-of-Stop-Shopping. Talen began the act by taking up residence amongst the other sidewalk preachers on a street-corner in Times Square in New York City as Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was transforming the area into a more tourist-friendly shopping space. He started out preaching about the impending “shopocalypse” across the street from the Disney store, which he saw as emblematic of the destruction of real public space in the U.S. and its colonization by ersatz consumer-culture. As the character developed, he began recruiting others and designing incursions into the store itself. He also produced more traditional theatrical performances starring the character, developing a committed following and, eventually, a full-choir, and now uses the persona and his congregation for actions directed against corporations like Wal-Mart, Starbucks, and the Disney Store, as well as campaigns to rescue community gardens and other public landmarks in New York. They also conduct workshops, lectures, gospel concerts, public confessions, and revivals, and are now the subject of a documentary about consumerism, globalization, and the commercialization of Christmas called What would Jesus Buy? In all, Talen preaches the gospel of stop-shopping, accompanied by enthusiastic “Amens” and “Alleluias” from his flock.

The retail actions are frequently structured as a form of invisible theatre. For instance, in one Disney-store incursion, he coordinated what he calls a “Cell Phone Opera” (Talen, What Should I Do 71). A group of volunteers were planted in the store ostensibly buying toys, but each had a change of heart, calling someone on their cell phone to have an argument about the issue.

Gradually, individual conversations overlapped and grew in volume, as they shouted “I will not buy this for Danny!...I won’t get this sweatshop tchotchke” or “This is not Pooka’s idea of New York!...Minnie Mouse with a torch.” As the security guards began to catch on, Talen revealed his reverend’s costume and began to preach about the evils of consumerism. Before being escorted out, the others then hid tape-recorders amongst the merchandise playing statements made by sweat-shop workers about the company. Actions like these are designed to catch the attention of others in the store, but to, at first, appear plausibly spontaneous, drawing bystanders into the unfolding scene. Similarly to the Yes Men, Talen aims to entice those around him into thinking about their everyday habits and brand-names politically and to generate collective anger, explaining “Victoria’s Secret is still not associated with clear-cutting virgin forests. Starbucks still insists it has nothing to do with employing 7 year olds. These companies have far more exposure from their famous ads than from the damning research that watchdog groups have on their websites. So then with these Devils, education becomes more important” (Talen, “Who’s Your Devil”). And he has chosen an ironic character through which to engage his audience, under whose sway, it is a little more permissible for him to rant and rave in public. Reverend Billy allows Talen to take his convictions to almost grotesque extremes, both amusing and inspiring those around him. As he himself puts it, he is the “politicized fool” (Dee 22).

Ironic Authenticity

Without a doubt, it is the performative power of the Reverend that makes what Talen has to say compelling. In his writing, (he has written two books, slipping in and out of the Reverend character) he comes across as, well, preachy. His diatribes seem didactic and overwrought. In performance as Reverend Billy, however, he is saved from many of these excesses through the

distance that his ironic character affords him, an element that is difficult to translate into writing. It is this form of embodied irony that is the key to the character's power, allowing him to tailor his act to the particular situation at hand and to respond to the momentary reactions of his audience. As Billy, Talen manages to be both playful and serious at the same time. In fact, Talen's use of the preacher persona nicely throws the use of activist irony into relief. Though it could appear at first glance that he is simply mocking evangelist preachers and religiosity in general, this is far from the case.

All of the journalists and commentators who have profiled Reverend Billy remark on the real passion he summons forth in his flock. As Jonathan Kalb describes it:

Flooding the halls he performs in with an astonishing torrent of righteous words about the spell of consumer narcosis, he ends up offering hundreds of hard-core artsy skeptics (often in their twenties) their first chance ever to shout "Hallelujah!" and engage in Pentecostal call-and-response. In so doing, they find themselves possessed of a precious community that is not accessed via flickering screens, as well as a delightful channel for various inchoate angers that he has done them the service of naming. Just as a placebo is sometimes more effective than medicine, a phony preacher is sometimes more comforting and inspiring than a real one. (Kalb, 163-164)

Reverend Billy preaches with genuine emotion and conviction, momentarily co-opting the real power that the preacher-figure exerts, allowing everyone else to get caught up in his fervor, but still maintaining a safely ironic gap, drawing on what Michael Pickering and Sharon Lockyer point to as the inherent ambiguities of comic impersonation (Pickering and Lockyer). In the What Would Jesus Buy documentary, there is a striking scene in which Billy performs what

appears to be an impromptu baptism in a Staples parking lot, as Billy, his choir, and the baby's father become genuinely, strangely touchingly, engrossed in imbuing the baby with their hopes for a less commercialized future. Similarly, Talen recounts a particular revival he held to save Edgar Allen Poe's house from demolition, explaining, "the impromptu sermon was working. I was repeating a single phrase five times and a congregation of ironists was shouting 'Amen' back, a knowing response that contained both parody and the hope that we would soon transcend it" (Talen, What Should I Do 103). Here the irony is not simply in the service of ridicule or a snarky superiority; rather, there is a more complicated form of play involved, one that is deeply dependent on a discursive community willing to participate, creating the ironic reality in concert.

The popularity of the Reverend Billy character provides an excellent case study for contemplating attraction to modes of communication like irony and satire. There is no doubt that all of the groups profiled here are politically left-of-center. And, though I am wary of subscribing to facile descriptions of what, in the United States, is referred to as the red-state/blue-state divide, I do think there is certainly an issue of taste-publics at play (that is by no means limited to the United States). Amongst younger, urban, liberal populations, there is some distrust of black-and-white morality, and a related gravitation toward a more savvy, detached view of the world, one that easily incorporates a knowingly ironic sense of humor. A figure like Reverend Billy perfectly plays into this sensibility. As he describes it, the group does not believe in a continuous god:

I myself am a straight white male, and history shows that I'm the last person to trust with a continuous, enthroned God. After a month of the same God I'd start shouting at the neighbors. After six months my tank's in your front yard. So we went around sampling gods. It took a while, but finally we found the god-goddess

of an Egyptian Gnostic sect who believed in a new god every day. They said, ‘I wake up and know that today I will duet with the mystery, and we will make God together.’ Yes, the portable, renewable Supreme Being. Sounds much safer.” (82)

Reverend Billy’s church then offers the chance to pick and choose the elements of religion that one likes (perhaps qualities like community, spirituality, and a higher truth), while remaining cynically distrustful of organized religion and power. As the Reverend proclaims, they strive to “Put The Odd Back In God!” (Talen, “Statement of Belief”). And it is this irreverent reverence that is then funneled into the political actions, drawing on the energy of creative, Do-It-Yourself activism, providing the strength and inspiration of a like-minded community, or counter-public, while foregoing rigid dogma. For a generation predisposed to read the world with a detached criticality and self-reflexivity, it is the perfect combination of passion and purpose tempered with a knowing wink.

Conversely, however, irony as a mode of political discourse is certainly not appreciated by everyone. More often than not, it seems to polarize the audience, potentially frustrating or even enraging those who do not appreciate the joke, those outside of the discursive community. For example, during a piece on the Billionaires for Bush aired on National Public Radio, a reporter interviewed bystanders at a Bush fundraiser that had attracted protesters, including the Billionaires. One onlooker responded to a question about the group by saying, “I think they’re making a mockery out of it and it’s a joke, and it’s pretty embarrassing. It’s confusing to children and it’s confusing to a couple of adults here as well. And I have more respect for the people over there who are saying what they happen to feel. They dress normally. They don’t have to come in costume and have a gimmick” (“Group of Anti-Bush Protestors”). This woman professed greater respect for the regular protesters who were not portraying characters, as they

were saying what they feel, hitting on one of the major pitfalls of ironic discourse: that it is predicated on indirection, potentially frustrating its audience through a perceived dishonesty or inauthenticity. Those who are unwilling to meet these groups halfway in reading their performance ironically typically dismiss them as nonsensical or see them as actively offensive.

Additionally, as Larry Bogad points out about an Australian drag-queen cum political candidate (Pauline Pantsdown) who parodied a serious Prime-Ministerial candidate (Pauline Hanson), while the performer did do serious damage to the politician's campaign, possibly contributing to her loss of the election, he also likely activated her supporters, "polarizing the North, stereotypically constructed as white, rural, and homophobic, against the stereotype of the urbane, queer-friendly, cosmopolitan South" (Bogad 198). As Bogad goes on to say, "such is the risk with any political cartoon, an art form that is by definition unfair" (198). Likewise, groups such as the Billionaires actively mobilize stereotypes of the wealthy and politically powerful as greedy and uncaring, while quite likely fueling stereotypes of liberals as effete, inauthentic intellectual-snobs.

However, it seems unlikely that any of these politically Left groups believe they will be able to transform the opinions of many committed conservatives. Instead, they play to those who already follow their logic and who appreciate their ironically arched eyebrow. In other words, they rely on the existence of discursive communities. Reverend Billy, for instance, understands his potential congregants well and provides them with a welcome focal point for existing sensibilities, beliefs, and yearnings, so that they are more than willing to engage both the said and unsaid meanings of his performance. Hutcheon, as discussed, argues against the idea that irony actively creates in-groups. Rather, she explains "*it is discursive communities that are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive – not ironies.*" (97) Though I am in agreement that

discursive communities precede the deployment of irony, I believe she nevertheless ignores the issue of creating solidarities, neglecting the work that having one's assumptions confirmed by others does in building the feeling of community. Or, perhaps, this is simply where the concept of discursive communities diverges from that of publics and counterpublics. The mere existence of shared sensibilities does not a counterpublic make. It seems clear that activist groups drawing on irony do so at least partially to bring observers' attention to their shared understandings, fueling the sense of community in opposition. In other words, they work to parlay existing discursive communities into actively politicized ones, relying on the co-participatory workings of irony to spur people into viewing themselves as a collective with collective power. Here too, is where the techniques of invisible theatre are aimed, ideally functioning to make individual bystanders feel part of a group with shared beliefs and goals, to suddenly become aware of all those others they share opinions with and to feel empowered by that strength in numbers.

This speaks to the performative element of counterpublics that Warner lays out, in that each text or performance strives to bring into being a public that not only shares its worldview, but will continue to circulate its discourse. These activist groups strive to turn shared understanding into sustained circulation. Since we all live in many different discursive communities at once, the trick for activists, I would argue, is to privilege the importance of one in a particular moment in time. When there are inevitably multiple competing demands on one's attention and allegiances, it is crucial that activists be able to make one's connections to a particular community of interests seem especially tangible and pressing, thereby ensuring the continued circulation of that community's discourse.

It is this community-enhancing ability, aided by an existing cultural predilection and a media system hungry for anything with entertainment value that make irony a particularly

attractive mode for contemporary activists, leading many to seize on it as a potentially forceful weapon of the weak. The use of irony is what Michel de Certeau would refer to as a “tactic” (xix). He differentiates between “strategies” which are employed by power structures that have a place from which to generate relations with an exterior, and “tactics” which, conversely, do not have a base from which to operate. Instead “a tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety” (xix). Along these lines, Reverend Billy stages confusingly unstraightforward incursions into the regulated, corporate space of a Starbucks cafe, while the Billionaires for Bush ironically applaud the Republican party at its own events, and the Yes Men insinuate themselves into spaces reserved for legitimate power. Just as de Certeau uses the metaphor of walking in the city, the walker constantly subverting, in tiny ways, the rigidly structured space of the city, all of the activist groups profiled here speak in terms of taking back public space or public airwaves. Reverend Billy rages against the destruction of neighborhood communities, while The Yes Men hijack information flows. Each draws on relatively accessible technologies – documentary film, parody websites, internet networking, and viral replication – exploiting loopholes in the technologies (like a Google search’s inability to tell a parody site from an original), wresting them from their more corporate usages. Each subverts the seriousness of the dominant order, ironically reading against the grain and turning the humorless status quo into a lark.

None of the groups are aiming for outright revolution with these actions. In fact, the concrete “effect” of any given prank or happening is often difficult to see. It is for this reason that many commentators dismiss them as being of little consequence. As one reviewer remarks of the Yes Men’s documentary chronicle, “whatever Bonanno and Bichlbaum are up to, and it looks like enormous fun, it doesn’t strike me as particularly effective satire,” concluding that the

WTO has stopped responding to their attacks, likely because “the WTO, and George W. Bush’s corporate America generally, finds it rather easy to rise above such childish pranks, perceiving in them no threat to their values whatsoever” (Aspden 38). Even those more sympathetic to the tactics of these activists have a tendency to conclude that they have little potential for leading to substantive change. Christine Harold argues that appropriation artists and pranksters, while providing some satisfaction, are always acting in reaction to corporations and brands, meaning they are “not up to the task of providing new material, new ways of responding to or amplifying the legal substrates that make brands and markets work in the first place” (160), though they can help call our attention to these substrates. But I think that even the practitioners themselves would not argue that this type of playful activism, pranking, and identity-nabbing is enough in and of itself to produce mass change, nor would they assume that once the WTO has been publicly embarrassed, for instance, that we can all wash our hands of them and go home. Rather, they are one piece of the activist puzzle, but one that is particularly adept at engaging its audience, attracting attention, and rallying support, all of which are integral elements in building political momentum. These groups are working to shift public discourse, affecting the way we conceptualize of particular institutions or policies, and inspiring others to become politically engaged. And it seems that earnestness alone is no longer up to the task. Against a background of mediatized simulacra, earnestness can seem feigned, while, for many, there is something about irony that seems deadly genuine. Ironically perhaps, it is the mode of discourse most associated with detachment and obfuscation that is driving a new form of political commitment and will.

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