

# **The Lens of Images. Desire, Commodities, Media and Hacking**

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Images are themselves a lens on the culture which makes them. Walter Benjamin was both right and wrong about art in the age of mechanical reproduction. He was correct in stating that as images proliferate, their overall commercial value depreciates. He was wrong in assuming that manufactured images are worth less than their 'real world' referent.

As manufactured goods accelerate away from the decade in which they were made, they themselves gain a kind of new cultural value. Some commodities seem to accrue more cultural gravitas than others. The dodgiest of global trade in junk, the antique market bears testimony to the ways in which even the most trivial of manufactured items can become obscure objects of desire once made to enter the domain commodity relations.

## **Culture is What I Say it Is**

If desire is expressed through the commodity, and the commodity is that which is supposed to stand in for desire, to desire an end to commodity society is the desire to embrace that which consumer society deems no longer useful or valuable. Alongside this is the desire to re-inscribe certain specific things with new and unauthorised types of cult value. The culture hacker collects things which seem to have no value. She makes of the world around her a quilt of emblems of her own desire. She anticipates a world in which control and governance have shifted away from the surrogate mercantile type of economy to an economy of desire itself. The act of deciding what will become a cult item to oneself personally, is the first step toward emancipation from the Empire of Signs. Surely, others will come to see the significance of the enshrined emblems of personal liberty as self evident tokens of a broader idea of libertarian social and cultural possibility.

## **Desire is Free**

The hacker society is one which values desire above commodities, it makes the search for pleasure the same as the rejection of the mainstream culture itself. It is anti-suburban, anti middle class and pro urban. It yearns for experiences, which affirm the centrality of the creative act as a social relation between people of like mind. Where ideas, pleasure and fun and mystery and desire fuel the work of the media hacker, her world is one of constant uncertainty. Intertextuality, the migration of meanings from one context to another, is the catalyst of social change for the media maven. Play with them long enough, and you'll see that meanings arrive on the back of shots and sounds as stowaways. You stow away with those meanings too, a refugee from the Society of the Spectacle.

## **Choose (a) life**

In culture jammer cinema, it's the selection which makes the shot. It is both choosing and looking but not just the act of choosing, rather the noble decision to make choosing the centre of one's life. The decision to make looking for elements to play with results in the media hacker viewing problems facing her with curiosity, a sense of experimentation. No barrier should be taken seriously. No limit to access to the principle of free expression. You find some old films, you make a new film out of them. You find some old cassettes, you chop up the bits and make a new work out of them. Old media are windows on the times they come from. Images are like lenses onto other times and other places.

### **History Speaks While the Guy Holding it Drinks a Glass of Water**

Media speak as if the ventriloquist's doll of history. Looking at the sea of ancient images which constitute the western imagination, it is easy to see why so many museums are becoming theme parks. In a corporatised urban space, the notion of a civic use for cultural memory is potentially subversive. Implicit within the old-school idea of the museum is that the centre of civic life lies with local governance. Sponsorship and theme-parking does away with such troublesome notions of government in the service of a population, for its own sake. We must construct our own museums of cultural memory. If we don't remember the period before the Dark Times, nobody will. Bradbury at 451 degrees knows more than you do, honey. We're burning up to tell you like it was, like it is, like it may yet be.

### **The Worm Hole Theory of Collage**

William Burroughs insisted that his cut-up works of writing had properties of prediction about them. Implicit within this idea is that collage is a kind of dimensional travel, where intended meanings become disrupted so radically that the act of reworking words in a newspaper article or shots in a film actually disrupts the time/space continuum. Try showing a collage work to anyone not up with radical postmodernism and just sit back and wait for the questions about authorship, ownership, copyright and other methods of psychological police torture in the service of the State and Capital.

### **Assembly Instructions - Read Carefully**

Jamming is more than a stylistic technique. It is more than a simple set of artistic practises. It is for its most central practitioners, an entire philosophy of life. It means looking at the world as a kit of parts. The beatnik sensibility is one in which only the relation between images and sounds makes sense, not the parts themselves. The relationships, the moment between notes, the silence in a jazz riff, the double splice and the katchink sound it makes as it moves through the projector. The distortion on the tape, the hiss, the crackle. The hole damn pop sensibility.

### **Text is Picture is Sound is Authority is Negotiable.**

William Burroughs knew of the power of words as images. His ideas about the provisionality of meaning, and the dependence ideas have upon the cultural contexts in which they emerge have yet to be fully Understood, dealt with let alone let loose sufficiently widely enough to overthrow society!!!

The intensity of a shot well cut with a sound also well selected will rock audiences for a long time to come. Hacking is the spirit of play the spirit of letting the material speak to you. Listening and looking for patterns hidden in the material. OKAY BUBBA, SQUEEZE THAT MONKEY!!! To quote Ren 'n' Stimpy before they went commercial.

### **Familiarity and Defamiliarisation through Detournment of Everyday Experience.**

Encyclopaedias are often surrealistic juxtapositions of things organised alphabetically, imagine a film whose sequence of events matched that of the encyclopaedia! Aardvarks, to Zoetropes, that's all she wrote.

### **Jamming Retail: Shops as Museums of the Present.**

You search for things as if you were in the biggest thrift store in the world. The world is a bit thrift store. K-Mart is no longer a shop to buy things in. It is the museum of the present, for the archaeologist of the below \$40 consumer item. Everything is on special, and in all but price itself, is free. You look at the world as if it were some other place at some other time. You turn your alienation into an asset. Suddenly the culture of the lower middle class becomes an urban toolkit of survival and of anti-boredom. Things on the street, in gutters, behind fences, thrown away packaging become the fuel for a free imagination, accumulating in the growing database of ways to be free, as well as on the mantelpiece at home.

"Price Check, aisle four, hardware, manchester and adult males!!!" Store detectives are too busy masturbating while looking at security camera monitors to really stop desire in its tracks.

### **Database vs Narrative: Complementary Philosophies of Media**

Database is about the connections between related but separated elements. Searches provide lists of elements. Narrative is about linearity, sequential series of events, it is about organic growth, root like from the bottom up, from the top down, any which way but loose-lipped.

A culture jammed event is a combination of database and narrative. Database provides the navigational basis for searching for things, indexing, cross indexing elements, while narrative provides the structural framework for those database philosophy inspired found elements. The web, search engines, videogames are databases of experience you navigate through.

Narrative, by contrast is about hearing events out, having them unfold in a predetermined sequence. When you combine the logic of database and apply them to narrative you have a potent combination of forces. Look at all the videotapes on your shelves. All the books. Go to your cd collection. Now imagine that they were all in a database and you were able to combine every track of every cd, every scene of every film, and every chapter of every book into new works, determined by say, your favorite bits of each type of media. As the entire lot is now able to be reworked into new combinations, cultural reworkings become not only possible, but

necessary. As we move toward a database culture in which all texts are made available to all others, the empire of signs starts to crack as surely as the Berlin wall. Twas booting killed the beast.

To refine texts into fragments for later recombination is the philosophy and working approach of the idea hacker. To see all the world as a sea of samples is the privilege of the free. Academia tries hard enough, but is stymied by its own working methodology, its own beurocracy. A cultural studies department with no time tables in a permanent Burning Man would be the closest thing yet to New Babylon.

### **Database as non sequentialism for its own sake**

Database offers the technological means as well as the methodological basis for searching, indexing, seeing patterns between media elements. Narrative offers the moral container within which those elements can be organised in such a way that they reinforce the broader moral standpoint. Hacker culture is about living ones life as if authority had already been done away with, as if ones own liberty were a birthright and access to all things were not only possible, but to be expected. The ultra rich and the ultra poor are both familiar with what it is to be on the outside of society. With a database, you know about ways in which search criteria can be applied, for example by key-word, by date, by numerical index and so on.

Database is a natural extension of the quality of computers, but only hackers can redeem computers from the shackles of work, and all that goes with it. Where the provisionality of meaning proliferates, there you will find the possibility of life beyond commercial society. The mainstream world expects meanings, like people themselves, to remain behind the counter, within boundaries, within their pre-determined cultural office dividers. In the early 1990s when a nightclub in Melbourne screened ultra-realistic ads warning people of the dangers of drink driving in the context of sado masochism, the shit hit the fan. Infuriated that their social realist ads depicting supposedly real traffic accidents were being detoured to satisfy the desire of a cultural minority.

### **Napsterising Everything, For All Time**

Guy Debord insisted that plagiarism was a key to liberty. He even went so far as to say that progress implies it. If the future of our world lies in the belief that all meanings should be stripped of any claim to authenticity then museums, universities, and other last remaining bastions of modernist essentialism whould allow students to copy texts freely.

Copying music, films, books, indeed any type of media can only ultimately assist in the eventual devaluation of ideas as commercial entities. What if suddenly the Napsterisation of all ideas were made possible. All films, all music, all books, all texts became enterable within the realm of database?

Once made database elements, the constant generation and regeneration of meanings could technically at least, be enterable into a kind of Nelsonian Xanadu realm in which all films and all texts could be perpetually reworked and recombined.

You might have noticed that when downloading files from Napster, you would often get cut off. This would result in most files being only partial songs, or sounds. We have a generation emerging who are Quite happy to have only bits of songs, bits of films, bits of texts. The fragments are horny! They want to get it on and procreate.

All I am saying is give the pieces a chance!