It stands on its head: Commodity fetishism, consumer activism, and the strategic use of fantasy

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(Received 6 June 2011; final version received 10 August 2012)

This essay looks at the ways in which consumer activists have grappled with the particular and peculiar nature of the commodity, first outlined by Karl Marx in *Capital*. Given the phantasmagoric nature of the commodity, it makes sense that consumer activists have often made fantasy the focus of their attack, employing a strategy which might be called *de-fetishizing the commodity*. This sort of consumer activist strategy has traditionally been employed in two ways: the *Revelatory* and the *Restorative*, revealing the ‘true history’ of the commodity and attempting to restore a non-alienated relationship between consumers and commodities. In more recent times, however, consumer activists such as Yes Men, Reverend Billy, and others have embraced a new strategy. This form of activism does not reject the fantasy element at the core of the commodity, but instead embraces it and makes it transparent: a dream that presents itself as a dream. Via a route *through the commodity fetish* itself, these activists have devised a means to mobilize fantasy and desire powerfully and popularly, and also ethically and effectively.

**Keywords:** fantasy; commodity fetishism; consumer activism; Yes Men; Reverend Billy

At the heart of the commodity lies a fantasy or rather a series of layered fantasies. The first fantasy is something Karl Marx noticed in his famous section on commodity fetishism in Volume 1 of *Capital*: every commodity contains a ‘secret’. Its secret is its real history: the people who made it, the materials it is made from, and even the uses it will be put to. In the commodity, however, this complicated web of human and natural interdependencies disappears. As Marx writes ‘the commodity form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this’. He continues, arguing that the commodity, ‘is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things’ (Marx 1867/1976, 165).

The first fantasy, then, is the fantasy of the commodity’s origin and production — a fantasy of exclusion or omission: the hiding away of the social and political, that is, what Marx (1867/1976, 165) calls the ‘socio-natural’ aspects of production. But Marx noticed something else as well. Speaking of a simple table he writes that:

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As soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuous-ness [literally, that which can be sensed]. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (Marx 1867/1976, 165)

This is the positive fantasy of the commodity; a fantasy not of omission but of addition. This is the transformation of a commodity into something transcendent; a phantasmagoria. This fantasy character of the commodity was only glimpsed by Marx in 1867, today we have whole industries of advertising and marketing whose job it is to develop this element. These people’s job – one that they are very good at – is to fill the absence with a presence.

This new presence is a fantasy insofar as it cloaks the ‘true’ history of the commodity and offers up a created ideal in its place. An instance of this process is not hard to find, take the tried and true (if somewhat tired) example of a cup of Starbucks coffee. With each cup of Starbucks coffee served, dirt and beans and nature are erased and replaced by a pristine white cup, and dark-skinned coffee growers are substituted by a groovy, green mermaid. But the fantasy does not stop here. Every advertisement selling every commodity is built upon a promise that it can never deliver. What is being offered is not the socio-natural history of the commodity being sold, nor even the use value of the product, but instead a socio-fantasy of an identity and community that the consumer desires.

Returning to Starbucks: a product (coffee) is combined with a service (the café) wrapped up in a fantasy as each beverage is presented as a gateway into a lifestyle. This is hardly arcane knowledge, hidden way in obscure and angry Marxist journals, but a strategy openly and proudly asserted on the international corporation’s website. ‘We’re not just passionate purveyors of coffee’, they boast, ‘but everything else that goes with a full and rewarding coffeehouse experience’ (Starbucks 2011a). The components of this ‘experience’ include music ‘chosen for its artistry and appeal’, and available for sale at the check-out counter. There is a unique lingo: ‘Tall’ (for a small coffee), ‘Grande’ (recalling the café culture of Italy), and ‘Venti’ (Italian for ‘twenty’, but trademarked by Starbucks in 1985). And there is setting, with each of the 6400 Starbucks stores worldwide falling into one of four ‘design concepts’: Heritage: ‘reflecting the mercantile roots of our first store...with worn wood, stained concrete...and factory-inspired lighting’; Artisan: ‘taking inspiration from Modernism of the 1930s...a creative gathering place for culture and the arts’; Regional Modern: ‘with regionally inspired furniture and culturally relevant fabrics’; and finally, the avant-garde: Concept: ‘created...to explore innovations within the coffee house. We call them our “design sandboxes”’ (Starbucks 2011b). As Starbucks, taking a page from Marx, astutely attests: ‘We are so much more than what we brew’ (2011a).

The promises that advertising makes is always based on fantasy: not one of outright deception (although we are never as happy sipping our latte as the people pictured in the magazine) but because what is being promised is social, psychological, and even political, but not material (Ewen 1976). Audaciously, Starbucks promises what they call ‘a connection’ (2011a), but it is not a connection with the socio-natural world of the coffee produced and served, but a connection with a fantasy life-world of arts and culture and history wherein the harried consumer is magically transformed into a leisureed artist or intellectual enmeshed within a community of Italianate, loft living, retro-historical yet culturally relevant, and thoroughly inspirational bohemians. Needless to say, a cup of
coffee cannot deliver free time, creativity, culture, travel, nor an alternative occupation, and as such the promise made can never be met. It remains a fantasy and, as any marketer can tell you, the best sort of fantasy is the one never fulfilled: it keeps you coming back for more.

Almost as long as there have been commodities, there have been consumer activists: groups and individuals pushing for regulations in the production and sale of goods and services, critical muckrakers exposing the abhorrent labor practices behind such goods and services, and idealistic organizers attempting to create better, less-alienating systems of production, exchange, and consumption. Given the phantasmagoric nature of the commodity, it makes sense that consumer activists have often made fantasy the focus of their attack, employing a strategy which might be called *de-fetishizing the commodity*. This sort of consumer activist strategy has traditionally been employed in two ways: the *Revelatory* and the *Restorative*.

The revelatory strategy aims to reveal the ‘real’ socio-political history that lies behind every commodity: its raw materials, the labor practices which produce it, the resources expended in its production and consumption, and even the commodity’s real use value. In the USA, for instance, the Consumers Union, founded in 1936 and probably best known for its publication *Consumer Reports*, states its mission as addressing the needs of ‘Consumers [who] lacked a reliable source they could depend on to help them distinguish hype from fact and good products from bad ones’ (2011). Moving to the left and further up on the activist scale, there are groups such as the National Labor Committee (NLC) (now the Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights). The NLC garnered a great deal of attention in the mid-1990s by leveraging celebrity association with products, like talk show host Kathie Lee Gifford’s Wal-Mart clothing line, and basketball star Michael Jordan’s association with Nike sneakers, into high-profile public relations campaigns that exposed the labor conditions of the sweatshops producing celebrity-sponsored products (IGLHR 2011). Similarly, the US student group United Students Against Sweatshops, by revealing the often dire working conditions of the workers who produced the shirts and hats that carried university logos, have pressured universities over the past dozen years into signing agreements that guaranteed fair labor practices and independent monitoring (USAS 2011).

The revelatory strategy of commodity activism lends itself particularly well to the esthetic. The art of revealing the dark side of reality goes back at least to the horrific paintings and drawings of insane asylums, prisons, and battlefields of Francisco Goya in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, into the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century images of human poverty by photographers such as David Octavius Hill, Robert Adamson, Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, and Dorothea Lange, and beyond. In each case, the goal is to reveal the hidden, light the darkness, in order to make the social ills, usually invisible to the middle and upper classes, visible. As the great nineteenth-century social novelist Victor Hugo posed rhetorically: ‘What then is required?’ ‘Light! Light in floods!’ (Hine 1909/1980, 112).

In more modern times, it is not just the lives of those poor and working classes who produce commodities that need to be lighted up, but the commodity itself. The Canadian anti-consumerist magazine *Adbusters*, for example, regularly lampoons advertisements for products on their pages, ‘culture jamming’ the fantasies of consumerism with images that reveal the real result of using the product. The iconographic cartoon character of Joe Camel is pictured lying in a hospital bed with the slogan ‘Joe Chemo’ above; an equally recognizable shot of an Absolut vodka bottle is given a drooping neck and a tag line beneath which reads ‘Absolut Impotence’; both examples are an
attempt to reveal the true health effects of smoking and drinking that are usually hidden behind advertisers’ fantasies (Adbusters 1996). Pushing the idea of revealing the real behind the fantasy in a different direction, New York City artist Eve Mosher has proposed an art piece cum political statement that would transform a coffee cart, an ubiquitous presence on the streets of her home city, into a ‘Real Cost Coffee Cart’ whereby ecological and human costs would be factored into the purchase price of each cup. Black coffee would start at the ‘real cost’ of 25 dollars (23 if you bring your own cup!) but add a bit of milk and sugar and factor in the costs to the ecology from cutting down forests, raising cows and planting sugar plantations, and health-related costs stemming from the human consumption of bovine growth hormones and processed sugar, and the cost of a cup shoots up to 45 dollars (Mosher 2011).

The tactics might vary, but the strategy remains the same: the political problem is identified as one of ignorance and the role of the activist is to shine light on the darkness and reveal the true nature of things. This is an approach with deep roots; intellectually it arises with the Enlightenment, whose thinkers valorized the idea of a discernable reality unencumbered by tradition or superstition. More popularly, one can see the ideal in nineteenth-century folk tales like Hans Christian Anderson’s ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’. The story, if you remember, is of a vain emperor who is tricked into buying a spectacular suit of non-existent clothing which he then shows off by parading through town. The townspeople ‘ooh’ and ‘ah’ and comment on what a fine suit of clothes the emperor wears. Then, from the sidelines, a young boy cries out: ‘He has
nothing on!’ and, upon hearing this undeniable fact, the people whisper it ear to ear, awaken from their illusion, and live happily ever after. Is this not the primal fantasy of so many consumer activists? If they just reveal the truth, the scales will fall from people’s eyes and they will see the world as it really is.

If revelation of the real history of the commodity is one activist strategy, another is a restitution of the real, that is: restoring the natural-socio-connections between nature, people, and products. Again, this is not a new strategy. From the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, with its attendant division of labor and alienation, activists created workers cooperatives and utopian experiments in an effort to return to – often mythic – past practices of labor and life. And as early as 1848, Marx and Engels (1848/1977) were attacking such activities as ‘reactionary’ or ‘critical-utopian’ socialism in their conclusion to The Communist Manifesto. Nevertheless, the restorative activist strategy continues today in practices such as Community Supported Agriculture, in which consumers invest time and money directly in a local farm, and even farmers’ markets, where – ideally – actual producers sell their products directly to consumers. The ‘Fair Trade’ consumer movement aims to extend this intimacy to a global marketplace by assuring consumers that the people who create the products they consume are treated well and recompensed fairly, and that the agricultural or manufacturing processes that create the product are ecologically sustainable; enabling, in Fair Trade USA’s own words ‘the Conscious Consumer’ (2011). In each instance, the hope is to making conscious and political, and thus visible, the strands of human interdependence in the production and consumption of commodities.

Another tactic following the same strategy is the effort to do with less, thereby extricating oneself from the cycle of commodity production and consumption. The ecological mantra of Reduce–Reuse–Recycle is the mainstream articulation of this practice, but there are also more activist models. Buy Nothing Day is one such example. First organized in Vancouver in 1992 as ‘a day for society to examine the issue of over-consumption’, Buy Nothing Day was soon taken up and promoted by fellow Canadians at Adbusters magazine, and is now held in over 65 countries where activists stage sit ins, hold street parties, cut up credit cards, go on shopping – zombie walks through malls and whirl-marts through stores (Adbusters 2006). The goal of the annual action is less material than ideological; the direct economic impact of the actions of a handful of activists is acknowledged as minimal, but the spectacular nature of some of their protests aims to capture wider attention and imagination. A more sustained effort to highlight over-consumption was the highly publicized, year-long experiment by Colin Beaven, a/k/a ‘No Impact Man’. Beaven, along with his wife and 2-year-old daughter, set out in 2007 to exist with zero net impact on the environment – no TV, no toilets, no lights, no plastics, no products in packaging, no trash – while still living and working in New York City. As Beaven explains it, the goal was not only to minimize his impact on the environment, but also to explore questions of what makes a more simple, satisfying, and sustainable life. In a word, to restore his connection to himself and the world around him (Beaven 2011).

A critic could (and should) point out that through their efforts to eradicate material commodities and commercial services from their lives, No Impact Man and the activists behind Buy Nothing Day have done little to challenge the commodity form itself. Quite the opposite: in their ‘Culture Shop’ Adbusters sells earth-friendly, fair-trade manufactured shoes such as the ‘unswoosher’, made of vegetarian leather and hemp, with a ‘hand drawn sweet spot for kicking corporate ass’ (2012). Beaven produced a blog during his experiment, and a book and feature-length film after; he’s even trademarked
the name No Impact Man\textsuperscript{TM}. Through their practices of criticizing the commodity and arguing for its eradication, this form of activism often, unintentionally, creates a new form of commodity, one well suited for our informational times: the brand. The fantasy of a world without commodities, and the new forms of commodities associated with it: altered advertisements, bio-pic movies, corporate ass-kicking footwear——seem to detach themselves from the activism that lies behind them, and the history of human agency is lost in the ‘brand’ of Conscious Consumer\textsuperscript{TM}.

The models of activism I have described above have a long history and still occupy an important place in the overall struggle within and against consumer capitalism. Yet these practices also have real limitations. Revelatory activism is conditioned upon the faith that knowing leads to doing, that is: that once someone knows the truth this will automatically lead to an alteration in their actions. This is naïve. In the right conditions knowledge can equal power, but it can just as easily result in confusion, cynicism, and paralysis as people cannot process the flood of information they receive, do not know how to make meaning of these facts, and are unable to find an actionable outlet for their new-found knowledge. Restorative activism is also caught in a bind: the ‘conscious consumer’, who wants to restore the natural-socio connections between herself and her world, is also a lucrative target market and potential consumer (and in some cases producer) for a new range of commodities aimed at fulfilling this fantasy. Anti-consumerism becomes commoditized.

There is, however, a different type of consumer activism currently being enacted in the USA and elsewhere. This activism does not reject the fantasy element at the core of the commodity, but instead embraces it. By embracing fantasy, these activists have figured out a way to mobilize fantasy and desire powerfully and popularly, and also ethically and, potentially, effectively.

The Yes Men, two activists going by the name of Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno, are a US-based duo internationally known for pranking commercial corporations, governmental organizations, and news outfits. Their most famous prank was likely the impersonation of a Dow Chemical spokesperson on the BBC World News. Interviewed live on the twentieth anniversary of the industrial disaster in Bhopal, India on 3 December 2004, ‘Jude Finisterra’ (aka Andy Bichlbaum) informed the BBC’s global audience that Dow, who had recently acquired the company directly responsible for the gas leak and chemical spill, was taking full responsibility for the tragedy, liquidating Union Carbide, the offending company, and using all resulting profits to clean up the toxic site, research the health hazards of other Dow products and offer restitution to the Indian victims. With news of this unprecedented act of corporate responsibility, Dow’s stock immediately slid an estimated 2 billion dollars. Over the past decade, the Yes Men have undertaken scores of such stunts that either reveal the barbarous logic behind business as usual or offer up a phony vision of a caring company that the real corporation is then forced to contradict.\textsuperscript{4}

These sorts of high-profile actions have made the Yes Men activist celebrities (with no less than two feature-length films about them), but Bichlbaum and Bonanno have also worked on smaller campaigns that draw upon their trademark style of impersonation while also raising critical concerns about commodities and marketing. One such example is the 2011 campaign ‘Coal Cares’, done in conjunction with US environmental and public health group called Coal is Killing Kids. Like many Yes Men projects, this one starts with a web site: an inviting, family-friendly site with the tag line ‘Coal Cares’. Under the name of a rolling roster of real energy companies, Coal Cares declares its mission ‘to reach out to American youngsters with asthma and to
help them keep their heads high in the face of those who would treat them with less than full dignity’. Games and puzzles and fun facts are provided on the site, all designed to make asthmatic kids feel good about having respiratory illness, and feel even better about coal emissions and the coal industry. Fun fact: ‘Wind turbines can kill up to 70,000 birds per year, or 4.27 birds per turbine per year. Coal particulate pollution, on the other hand, kills fewer than 13,000 people per year’. The centerpiece of the site, however, is Coal Cares’ ‘Puff-Puff Inhaler’ program, wherein the social stigma of using an inhaler is addressed with a line of ‘cool’ devices such as: ‘My first inhaler’, decorated simply for toddlers with a rubber duck, ‘My Little Pony’ an inhaler designed for the discerning 3–8-year old, and the tween-targeted ‘The Bieber’, emblazoned with the picture of Justin Bieber. As the site proclaims ‘For
kids who have no choice but to use an inhaler, Coal Cares™ lets them inhale with pride’ (Coal Cares 2011).

Coal Cares is pure Swiftian satire: criticizing the beneficial claims that coal companies make and the public relations puffery they employ by inflating such claims to the point of absurdity. In doing this, the Yes Men hope that their audience will look at the real claims made by the genuine coal companies in a different light. It is a tactic of revelation – but not through a straightforward unveiling of the truth, but through a more engaging circuitous route that demands that the consumer do some of the cognitive work themselves. Like all satire and irony only part of the message is provided, and this part in reverse. In order to figure out the ironist’s message, the audience needs to supply the mirror image – the positive message – themselves. In the Coal Cares campaign, the Yes Men do not tell the audience that coal is bad for health and that coal companies care only about profits, instead they let the audience come to that conclusion by deconstructing the fatuous claim that ‘Coal Cares’. It is an activist strategy which brings outsiders into the critique.5

The Yes Men appropriate the form of the advertising pitch in order to counter the advertising of the coal companies. They borrow this familiar commercial form because to do so is humorous, it attracts attention and, in terms of activist resources, it is economical. ‘It gets to a whole lot of people who would never hear of a protest unless a bunch of people got arrested and the media covered it’, Bichlbaum (2011) explains. ‘People with no previous knowledge of the issue pass[ed] the site to their friends for its funny-value’. But in the process they are also doing something else: criticizing the commodity form itself. By dressing up inhalers in everything from rubber ducks to teen idols and promising that these products will ‘show others who’s cool at school’, and by representing coal companies as if they truly care about children, the Coal Cares site implicitly critiques the phantasmagoric associations that animate commodities: products and coolness, corporations, and public concern. Via a route through the commodity fetish itself, the Yes Men end up reconnecting the ‘natural-socio’ link that has been obfuscated: the link between coal production and respiratory health problems.

If the Yes Men employ fantasy in order to reveal and deconstruct the fantasies of corporate public relations, that is: an operation that negates fantasy, other US-based consumer activists mobilize fantasy in a ‘positive’ manner, as a way to suggest an alternative to consumer culture. One such example is Reverend Billy and his Church of Stop Shopping. Bill Talen, the man behind the persona of Reverend Billy, is a New York-based performance artist with the cadences, mannerisms, and the impressive pompadour of a televangelist. For over a decade, he has preached on the street, in performance spaces, in churches, in front of Wal-Mart and inside Starbucks stores. His foe: consumer culture. ‘Let’s talk about the Devil’, he says,

Corporate Commercialism has sped up to a roar, virtually unopposed. Consumerism is normalized in the mind of the average person, sometimes we even refer to ourselves as consumers forgetting that we are also citizens, humans, men, women, animals.

As the lines above suggest, it’s not the commodity itself that is the Devil but rather its fetish-like character. The Reverend’s mission is to release humankind from the hold the commodity has over our lives. Explaining why his ‘church’ often holds ‘services’ in shopping malls or in front of corporate headquarters, he explains
We try to complexify the moment of purchase, to snap people out of their hypnosis and back into the mystery of being human. We remind people that things come from somewhere, that products have a resource past, a labor past. Someone made it, and it is made of something, we trace the route a product took to get on the shelf, the life it might have when we throw it away. (Reverend Billy 2011)

In other words: Reverend Billy is attempting to de-fetishize the commodity: resurrecting the ‘natural-socio’ history of products. Working with organizations such as Oxfam and Global Exchange, for instance, the Reverend and his Church joined a 2007 campaign to challenge Starbucks’s trade marking of Ethiopian coffee names, holding pseudo-religious revivals outside Starbucks stores to demand that the Ethiopian people be allowed retain the rights to the names of, and thereby some control over the profits from, their own coffee beans.

There is a difference, however, between the Reverend’s tactics and strategies and those of activists described above. Through his interventionist services, Bill does not so much deconstruct the commodity fetish and reveal the ‘true’ history as reconstruct alternative human relationships to commodities, a sort of mythological restoration. ‘We exorcize cash registers and remythologize the retail environment, we illuminate the Devil’, Bill explains. ‘We animate the objects that surround us and in so doing we re-animate ourselves’ (Reverend Billy 2011). Not coincidentally, The Church of Stop Shopping recently renamed itself as the Church of Life After Shopping. In order to undertake this act of re-mythologization and re-animation, Reverend Billy constructs an alternative fantasy. In his sermons and services, Bill draws upon the signs and symbols, the tropes and narratives of televised evangelical Christianity, but unlike other send-ups of organized religion, Bill does not do this to criticize the religious expression, that is: to ‘reveal’ it, but instead to tap into the popular form’s imaginative power and subvert it for his own political ends. He provides, in his own words, ‘the God that people who do not believe in God believe in’ (Grote 2002). The Reverend performs a genuinely moving service, complete with a professional choir and inspirational message, and it is difficult to attend one of his actions without being affected (or, rather, affected). Like a good marketer, Reverend Billy mobilizes a powerful fantasy.

At the same time, however, his audience understands that what they are taking part in is not quite ‘real’. Bill is not a Reverend, he is an actor and an activist, and no Devils are being exorcized from cash registers or credit cards. It’s all just a performance. The Reverend may rail outside the Disney store in New York’s Times Square against the sweated labor employed in the manufacture of their toys, denouncing Mickey Mouse as the Antichrist as he crucifies a large stuffed mouse upon a cross, but his televangelist persona is just as much of a cartoon character as Mickey (Grote 2002). And it’s obvious. This is where activist fantasy departs from consumer fantasy. Unlike the fantasies wrapped around commodities, the fantasies that Reverend Billy generates are transparent fantasies.

These are dreams that present themselves as dreams, and insofar as they are transparent there is a reality to them which commercial fantasies do not have. That is to say: there is no deception. Because of this, they have an ethical advantage over the fantasies attached to the commodity which necessarily present themselves as reality or real possibility. This built-in self-revelation has another advantage. Because the fantasies the Reverend generates make no claims to reality, there is no audience disappointment or potential activist disengagement when they do not come true. There is no moment when Bill can be ‘revealed’ to be a false prophet, or when his promise of a life after
shopping might be proven false. Yet Bill’s phantasmagorical performances have a certain affective and inspirational power, which consumer activist strategies based on real expectations and real conditions often do not have. Very much like the fantasies of consumer culture, The Reverend’s dreams have a power to inspire and to guide, to
be a lodestone to orient a political and moral compass. A goal to walk toward. *They move you.*

Openly employing obvious fantasy in order to move an audience to imagine economic and social alternatives is a tactic also used by San Francisco artist-activists Packard Jennings and Steve Lambert. In 2007, Jennings and Lambert received permission from the San Francisco Arts Commission to display large, illuminated posters on 24 kiosks lining one of the city’s main commercial thoroughfares. Their stated goal was to illustrate alternative scenarios for the city’s future. Challenging the nearly ubiquitous neo-liberal fantasy in which all public services are replaced by private and individuated consumption, the *artivists* wanted people to imagine other options. In doing research for the project, Jennings and Lambert surveyed ‘experts’ – academics, city planers, and transportation engineers – and asked them for their ideas. They then took those ideas of the future of San Francisco and, in their own words, ‘perhaps mildly exaggerated’ them (Jennings and Lambert 2007).

It is exactly this exaggeration that makes these activist’s imaginings so politically interesting. The posters depict skyscrapers that can be moved or demolished by popular plebiscite, a dog walk, lending library, and martial arts studio on a BART train, public transit by elephant back, commuting by zip line, transforming San Francisco into wildlife refuge, and turning a football stadium into an organic farm (and linebackers into human plows). What is so inspiring – and honest – about the visions of our future offered up by Jennings and Lambert is their transparent and fantastic impossibility. A city could become more ‘green’ with additional public parks and community gardens, but transforming San Francisco into a nature preserve, as one poster illustrated, where office workers take their lunch break next to a mountain guerilla? This is not going to happen. And that’s the point. Because it is not going to happen their fantasy fools no one. As is the case with Reverend Billy, there is no duplicity, no selling the people a false bill of goods. It’s a dream that people are aware is just a dream. But there is something else interesting happening here: such
impossible dreams offer the possibility of escaping the tyranny of the present while opening up a space for democratic participation in the process of imagining the future.

The problem with more traditional, reality-based, consumer activism is that it often becomes trapped within the very world it seeks to alter. This is the problem of totality: it is exceedingly difficult to imagine what you do not already know. As Rene Descartes pointed out long ago in his Meditations: you can dream of fantastical beasts like satyrs but only as an amalgam of things already known like men and goats. Our dreams of the future are rooted in the realities of the present, and thus are doomed to (re)present it. The activist response to this problem has often been one of criticism: pointing out the flaws of the present and thereby attempting to disassociate oneself from it. The problem here is that criticism becomes parasitical: wed to and dependent upon the very system it ostensibly rejects. Through their parodic advertisements and day of commercial abstinence, Adbusters critiques consumer capitalism, but their practices also only make sense within our commercialized society: the ads and the shopping malls. There seems to be no way out.

In presenting absurd fantasies for the future Jennings and Lambert offer a way out. They do not follow the Enlightenment path by proposing a thoroughly authentic discourse that somehow transcends the fantasies generated by neo-liberalism and commodity culture and thereby allows for some sort ‘critical autonomy’, but instead by embracing the phantasmagorical heart of the commodity and extending fantasies to their absurd extreme, thereby turning it against itself. Unlike the Yes Men, however, Jennings and Lambert are not interested in using fantasy to reveal and deconstruct fantasy, but instead mobilizing counter-fantasies that might offer a space for their audience to imagine for themselves. In doing this, Jennings and Lambert challenge a troubling propensity of consumer activism: the desire to simply to tell the people the truth. Living within a world of marketing spin and advertised fantasy, revealing and then telling the truth about the real state of the world appears an admirable ideal. The problem is its political impact, as the activist who presents the truth silences his audience. If one has the truth, what more is there to say? What more is there to do? ... except follow the lead of the truth-teller. Truth-telling is profoundly authoritarian.

But something else happens when confronted by the absurd fantasies of the future illustrated by Jennings and Lambert. Standing in front of one of their posters on a street corner you might smile at the absurd idea of practicing Tae Kwon Do on your train ride home. But you may also begin to question why public transportation is so unfunctional, and then ask yourself why should not a public transport system cater to other public desires. This could set your mind to wondering why the government is so often in the business of controlling, instead of facilitating, our desires, and then you might start to envision what a truly desirable State would look like. And so on, ad infinitum. By mobilizing fantasy and visualizing impossibilities, the artists create an opening to ask ‘what if?’ without closing down this free space by seriously answering ‘this is what’.

A critique could (and, again, should) be made that the alternative futures posters project developed by Jennings and Lambert, while brilliantly imaginative and motivated by sincere political interest, was more an act of art than a political action. Other activists, however, have learned from these and other artistico-political gestures, and integrate fantasy into larger consumer campaigns. Flirting with fantasy, these projects circle back to reality in what I think is a potentially fruitful way. One such example from the USA is the Oil Enforcement Agency, or OEA for short, designed and executed in 2007–2008 by long-time creative activist (and Billionaires for Bush founder)
Andrew Boyd who was hired by a consortium of activist groups – Global Exchange, Rainforest Action Network and the Ruckus Society – to expose green washing by the auto industry. The result was a new, volunteer-staffed, governmental agency with a unique mission. Just as the job of the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) is to police the abuse of ostensibly harmful narcotics, the charge of the OEA was to cure – as then President Bush described it in his 2006 State of the Union address – the country’s ‘addiction to oil’.

What Boyd and his fellow activists built was not a real enforcement or monitoring body, one that might reveal the reality of green washing and issue reports regarding the fuel inefficiency of the automobile industry (although the parent organizations did supply these facts); instead what they manufactured was the image of an enforcement agency: an official looking logo, a well-designed website announcing the agency to the world, dramatic photos of OEA agents in action, and a slickly produced ‘trailer’ for an upcoming documentary on the agency. (The documentary, needless to say, never existed, nor was it ever planned: what mattered was the promise of existence.) Local activists played the roles of OEA agents on the ground. Dressed in black paramilitary uniforms and armed with clipboards, violation tickets, and rolls of crime scene tape to cordon off offending vehicles, members of the OEA staged performative actions. Some of their most successful were at the Los Angeles, New York, and Detroit Auto Shows where they went in and quarantined oil-addicted Sport Utility Vehicles, handed out informational leaflets, and managed to insert the issue of green washing into mainstream news coverage of the auto shows.

The OEA was a media stunt, designed to reveal the commodity fantasy of ‘green’ gas-powered vehicles. As such, Boyd designed the Agency with an eye for maximum media impact. Like any good brand manager, he was looking to create, as he explains ‘a unified look and feel...to make it look like something, to pop out of the environment’, so that the OEA would get picked up and disseminated by the news media. Situated within a society that loves cop shows, he designed the OEA to look like a cop show. When queried about the use of props and uniforms and faux-movie trailers, Boyd (2011) explains it was a strategy of ‘borrowing authority’ from the commercial culture. Elaborating on this principle he says: ‘these are familiar and popular conventions, everyone already has these forms and images, this repertoire, within their imagination’. Instead of critically revealing the disabling fantasies of our spectacular society, Boyd borrowed from them: using the look and feel of commercial spectacle to lend the political action a legitimating power and, through the use of well-known tropes,
ensuring its ready comprehension by auto-show attendees, the news media, and the broader television audience.

The actions the OEA staged succeeded in attracting attention as a media spectacle, but the Agency also promised something more: it provided a fantasy of the future we ought to have. ‘We created the federal enforcement agency that was missing’, Boyd explains. ‘That should exist, needed to exist, but didn’t exist...so we created it’ (Boyd 2011). Against a world of professional agencies, the OEA was a voluntary association composed of everyday citizens; in contradistinction to a DEA which polices individual ingestion of illegal intoxicants, the OEA ticketed and quarantined world-despoiling products of major corporations. In this way, the OEA falls into a long line of ‘prefigurative politics’, wherein activists follow Gandhi’s advice to ‘be the change you want to see in the world’. Or, perhaps, the OEA is merely following the logic of the commodity by promising magical transformation and a fantasy future. Likely it ’s both: the OEA draws upon both long-time activist practices and traditional techniques of branding, marketing, and advertising.

Yet there is also a critical difference. Prefigurative politics and the commodity fetish make certain reality claims: the future will look like this, be it the beloved community prefigured by activists or the atomistic pleasures promised by advertisers. The OEA, like the Coal Cares campaign, Reverend Billy’s church, and the visions of the future posted on the streets of San Francisco, are transparent about the status of the fantasies they produce: they are not real, nor are they likely to happen. Even the Yes Men, whose stock-in-trade is impersonation always come clean. If their impersonations are not revealed immediately by outsiders, they do the revelation themselves. We ‘don’t let the lie stay on the table’, Bichlbaum (2011) makes certain to point out. This is an ethical stand, to be sure, but it is also a political principle. Transparent fantasies create opportunity for human agency.

When Marx set about to uncover the secret of the commodity in Capital it was not just the abstract ideal of truth he was after (although he was enough of an Enlightenment thinker to certainly desire this), it was the specific truth regarding the history of commodities he was attempting to reveal, namely that humans had created commodities, from nature, in cooperation with one another, and for genuine social and personal uses. In brief, the commodity’s real ‘socio-natural’ history. It is the political import of this ‘secret’ that interested Marx. In understanding that it is human agency and social cooperation that, literally, create our world, we are put in control of our collective destiny; we have made the world and, as such, so we can transform it and make it anew. This is a revolutionary truth. And it is this truth that is hidden in the process of fetishization whereby human history appears before us as an alien thing. To describe this process, Marx uses religion as an analogy, in which ‘the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is’, he concludes, ‘in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands’ (Marx 1867/1976, 165). Humans bow down before the commodities that they themselves have created, and we become mere consumers of a world already produced for us. This, of course, quite accurately describes the contemporary world of consumer capitalism.

Consumer activists following a Marxist-Enlightenment tradition attempt to tell the secret, critically revealing the rough, material human history that lies below the fantasy-slick surface of the commodity. By debunking consumer fantasies and de-fetishizing the commodity, these activists struggle to stand the commodity back on its feet. This is important work and should and, no doubt will, continue. However, over the past
dozen or so years an alternate activist strategy has been developed, one more in line with Marx’s other concerns: resurrecting human agency and identifying contradictions within capitalism that might provide methods and tools to transform the system. Instead of rejecting the phantasmagoric power of the commodity these activists draw upon it: using its signs and symbols to gain entry into the semiological status quo. They are ‘borrowing authority’ as Boyd puts it, in order to communicate their messages to a wider audience and piggyback on far-reaching commercial media streams. But this practice runs deeper than poaching the look and feel of commercialized culture in order to better speak the spectacular vernacular; at the core of this new form of activism is a strategy of generating new fantasies.

The fantasies these activists mobilize, however, are different than those which animate consumer capitalism; often different in content to be sure, but more important, they are different in form. As you may recall, the dual fantasy of the commodity is that commodities are created without human agency (the fantasy of omission) and that the purchase and use of the commodity will result in a magical transformation for the consumer, again without human agency (the fantasy of addition). It is exactly this absence of human agency which makes up the fetish character of the commodity. This fantasy of a world without human agency is not limited to commodities, but can be generalized to all human creation: social relations, political systems, and economic organization. Marx was notoriously resistant to fantastical – or Utopian – social thinking because he feared that the ideal society, like the commodity, could be fetishized: turned into an ideal to be worshipped or waited upon – ‘where products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own’ – rather than a society to be actively built.6 Heaven on earth, divinely delivered or, more likely, endlessly anticipated.

The fantasies generated and utilized by this new breed of consumer activist work differently, and the radical break comes in their transparency and frequent absurdity. A fantasy that presents itself as reality, or reality-to-be, does not allow for transformational agency. It presents a completed world to be entered, to ‘buy’ into, to be consumed – but not one to be created, for that work has already been done. By mobilizing fantasies that are so obviously fantasies, however, consumer activists open up spaces for human agency. Confronted with a desirable fantasy, but one that is clearly unrealized, the desire is to realize it, and the only way to do this is through their own agency. If the OEA is a good idea then it will have to be built; no power is there to provide it otherwise, and it must either become realized though human activity and organization or remain an acknowledged chimera. This demand for agency, however, runs deeper than the call for actualization of figments of activist imagination, it asks people to imagine for themselves. The absurdity of many of the fantasies conjured up by these activists – the caring corporation, the cartoon preacher, the far-out futures, the made-for-TV enforcement agencies – practically ensure that their audience will not be satisfied with these as practical alternatives to the status quo world of markets and commodities. These visions are too crazy, too goofy. Dissatisfied with the answers provided, the audience is encouraged to try their own hand, or mind as it were. These activist interventions are not simply pranks, nor however are they serious plans. They are prompts – prompts for agency and imagination.

This new activism is not without its problems. It is, by and large, a communications strategy. It works best when linked to old-fashioned boots-on-the-grounds organizing; when it is not part of a greater campaign this sort of activism has a tendency to become merely a media stunt, clever and funny but with little practical effect; what veteran
New York activist Leslie Kauffman has termed ‘ether activism’ (Duncombe 1997, 157). Nonetheless, this new wave of consumer activism has promise. The first rule of guerilla warfare is to know your terrain and use it to your advantage. Ours is a world of commodities and markets, and this wave of activists understand, and are willing to exploit, the features of this fantasyscape. In mobilizing fantasy as a means to critique and transform consumer capitalism, activists are standing traditional consumer activism on its head: no longer concerned with freeing the commodity from its fantasies they are experimenting with freeing fantasies from the commodity.

Notes
2. See, for example, Goya’s Yard for lunatics (1794) or the aquatint print series Disasters of war (1810s); Riis’ work can best be seen in his classic How the other half lives: Studies among the tenements of the poor (1890), where the desired political effect of such revelation (even if artfully posed) is explicit. Hine, who wrote ‘The dictum...of the social worker is “Let there be light”; and in this campaign for light we have our advance agent the light writer – the photograph’, was influential on may of the great depression era photographers who, like Dorothea Lange, worked for agencies of the Roosevelt Administration to make the case for governmental assistance and intervention in the lives of the poor (1909/1980, 112).
3. In a whirl-mart, activists stroll through stores in long lines, pushing shopping carts and buying nothing.
4. Dow Chemical, under wise public relations council, never contradicted the faux spokesman’s claims...so the Yes Men did it for them, issuing a denunciation of the stunt and insisting – in the name of the ‘real’ Dow Chemical – that they had no intention of taking responsibility.
5. Not coincidentally this favored tactic of eighteenth century satirists such as Jonathan Swift had become that of twenty-first-century advertisers who have figured out that the preaching model of persuasion just does not work and have begun to weave irony and absurdity into their campaigns in an effort to engage media-savvy and cynical consumers.
6. The classic expression of Marx’s anti-utopianism can be found in part III of his and Engels’ The communist manifesto on ‘Socialist and Communist Literature’. About ‘Petty-Bourgeois Socialism’ they have this to say: ‘Ultimately, when stubborn historical facts had dispersed all intoxicating effects of self-deception, this form of Socialism ended in a miserable fit of the blues’ (Marx and Engels 1848/1977, 240).

References


