

Unpacking the Activist Shtick: On the Representation (and Possibilities) of Activism in Popular Culture

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To fully understand the trends and fancies that determine our contemporary notions of both Western activism and, if I may, left-wing (often white and upper-class) movements of opposition, I would like to start out with a quick stop at 50s. More specifically, to the dank and smoke-filled clubs of those hip swinging existentialists we have come to know as the beatniks. I say, ‘come to know’, because that is—in essence—the core point this article will discuss: the issues surrounding coming to knowledge in an environment where the constant, staccato distortion of information is often taken as a given.

In the post-war 1950s homogenous America that prescribed suburban happiness above all else, it was no surprise the bleak looking Beats stuck out like a sore thumb. With their anti-materialist, “no new outfits, no corporate jobs” (Oatman-Stanford) attitude, in a society that centred itself on economic growth, the Beats were as foreign as they were confounding. This was made all the more obvious with the newly glowing living-room presence of the tv-screen. The movement that was mostly presented as anti (anti-what, the moderate American could not fathom) was not merely an insidious subject to be quietly discussed over tops of hedges and fences. More than that, the mainstream media had the unprecedented honour of presenting the American people with a full-on Technicolor image of this strange youth. However, the fascination with the ‘otherness’ of the Beats did not come solely from a curiosity toward the non-conformist: for that, the All-American boy-next-door did not have to look far. The United States is and has been, after all, the ever celebrated melting pot of nationalities: differences in lifestyles should not be too difficult to find.

1. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), was a student activist group that during the mid-60s up until 69 came to be seen as the face of the New Left.

Unfortunately, with the still overarching racist overtones of post-war identity politics, it was clear that *if* given the chance, one should identify as American first and foremost. This, combined with the constructed linkage of Jewishness with communism (a new ultimate evil) and absence of a decently voiced civil rights movement at the time—to name only the two most readily available examples—meant that to stick out was definitely not a good thing. All this was clearly felt among those who did not identify as white middle-class heteronormative. It seems strangely predictable, in retrospect, that those who *did* adopt a sense of ‘otherness’ were, for the most part, those who could afford to be different. True to fact, the Beats generation “took its cues” from New York’s “black creative community in the 1940s” (Oatman-Stanford). There was a certain obsession with the illicit underworld of the town, a “fixation or fascination,” with the “criminal element, with that sort of seedier side of the big city,” according to Alan Bisbord, author of *Beatniks: A Guide to an American Subculture*. “All those influences fused into this sense of being different, being an outsider, and not being a square, not being a person who has to play by the rules” (qtd. in Oatman-Stanford). Slowly, an industry began to form around the stereotype: pulp paperbacks in the 50s and 60s often featured the drug-crazed, highly sexual beatnik woman; black turtle-necks, berets, dark glasses, even *bongos* were sold by the dozen—allowing, perhaps, momentary access to a lifestyle that seemed fun, or dangerous, or simply easily mocked. Alongside this commercialised, easily marketed image of the beatnik, the actual *creative output* of the Beats was mainly dismissed—either that, or denounced, censored, overall discredited by popular critics. What was

left, in truth, was a hollow image of a manufactured stereotype that had come to represent and overpower the original. This sense of *hollowness* in representation within mass media is one I will return to later on.

The Beats were perhaps one of the first *voiced* subcultures to experience the backlash of representation within mass media in this new age of Technicolor; of consumption and economic structures, winding in and around themselves. They were not, by a longshot, the last. Jumping forward a decade and then some to 68, a very similar cycle can be seen of opposition and then the hollowing of that opposition in popular media. In many a lecture hall throughout the Western world, the year 68 is paraded about as the pinnacle and sole creator of what we today recognise as activism. Whether or not this is true, there is no way around the year's catalyst importance in history, economy, and politics. With the intensification of the Vietnam War, as well as the post-Cold War nuclear fear turning into an era of arms control, 68 saw an extraordinary transformation of society's involvement in governmental issues (Hunt 188). An involvement most memorable for the protests and revolts led by the discontented youth all over the world fighting for rights, for power, for change. Where the Beats aimed to disappear in order to 'drop out' of a materialistic society, this new opposition of the 60s aimed to *change* the society. However, when the desire for a different state of being meets enough roadblocks along the way, radical means of obtaining said desire are soon quick to follow. With this radicalisation of certain oppositional groups (take for an easy example the SDS'), violence was just around the corner. That, combined with the "shocking flamboyance" of the hippie lifestyle (Hunt 181), helped take the activist movements of 68 from a peripheral anti-normative group to something far more alienating: a threat. The general public was unsure and media was *fascinated*. In the decades that followed, as the hippie-activist stereotype was hollowed out and handed over to general discourse, something far more pernicious was taking place under the wraps. Where the Beats had their sense of cultural identification dismissed by the backlash of misrepresentation, the direct political consequences were fairly minor, as their involvement in politics was minor. With the activists of 68, the story is somewhat different, as it is far more deeply entangled in the discourse of political activism, of freedoms and ideologies and rights. An interesting example of the degree to which the stereotyping and discrediting of activist movements (and most importantly, the *civil rights* movement) still affects contemporary political discourse, is this idea of the 'PC movement.' The term PC, where

the letters stand for 'Political Correctness' and are applied generously and often randomly to either language or policies, is thought by some to be oppressive. Not just oppressive, counter active: it is perceived that PC language might reinforce what it is meant to prevent: sexism, racism, and a grand other variety of -isms.

Laurence Berg, Canada Research Chair for Human Rights, Diversity and Identity, disagrees with the previous notion that the politically correct stifles discussion and works as oppressive. Why? Because he does not really believe that PC policies exists in the first place. "What [they]'re calling the 'PC movement' I would call a social movement by marginalised people and the people who support them. [...] [A movement] to use language that's more correct—not 'politically correct'—that more accurately represents reality" (qtd. in Price). In a 2006 article, Momoko Price expands on this idea by explaining that what Berg is referring to is a way of thinking that "many of us students" were too young to catch "the first time around." Where the term 'politically correct' has survived the 90s, and continued to enter our discourse, the term 'human rights backlash' did not. 'Political correctness,' as an idea, as an *executed* attempt at changing representation, is completely and wildly different from what it was in its original form: not at all a political stance, but rather a right-wing tactic to dismiss—or, *backlash* against—left-leaning social change. In managing to mock what, at the time of changing social structures, some feel are the trivial aspects of the politics of human rights—"like its changing language"—the issue becomes obscured altogether (Price). The term is a reactionary one, created by those who were worried by the social changes that affected their everyday understanding of the world "in ways that pointed out their role in creating or reproducing *dominance and subordination*" (Berg, qtd. in Price, emphasis mine). Beyond that, the normalisation of the term 'PC' points to a another uneasy fact: between the fight for equality that started getting real attention in the media starting with 68 and today, something has happened within popular discourse. Something that would have us think that equality has long been achieved—that it has become obsolete. And thus the impression is given that it would be ridiculous to sustain 'archaic' language when talking of issues such as gender or ethnicity. Or, to put it differently, rather than reply to the demand of marginalised people to be treated as equals by *truly treating* 'them' as equals, popular culture went about to instantly create a caricature of the desire for equality. It did this by adopting a language constructed by those who aimed to discredit the movement. So what you get as a result when, for example, a TV personality

is sat at an all-white, all-male panel and expresses an exasperation with having always to be 'pc,' is the all around failure to notice that this exasperation is not due to a repetitive and empty desire to avoid touchy subjects. This exasperation is born of uneasiness, of the feeling of losing something they feel they have the right to express. What that something is? Privilege. And, in terms of race, "a loss of white privilege" (Price).

So far the progress has been that problematic, offensive language led to an expressed desire for different language, which led to a mocking discourse discrediting possible change. Even though there has not yet *been* a period of 'correctness,' somehow we are already exasperated, tired of it. Another maddening sound bite that is often reproduced when discussing the notion that we are, in any way, 'politically correct,' is that to participate in non-offensive language would result in the imaginary act dubbed 'reverse racism.' Political cartoonist 'Ampersand' from *Alas, a blog!* summed up the historical evolvement far more eloquently than I could in a sketch that portrays the 'White Man' trying to climb up onto a platform, using 'Black Man's back to heave himself up while saying, "This is for your own good." The Black Man, angry, says he has had enough, that he is getting up as White Man looks down from above as declares that he is "real sorry about before" and that he "knows better now." Swell, says Black Man, reaching up with an outstretched arm. "Give me a hand up, will ya?" "Of course not!" answers White Man, reclining on his platform. "That would be reverse racism." And besides, "If I got up here myself, why can't you?"

According to Dominique Clement, a human rights historian at the University of Victoria, we are currently at a point where people think: "[W]ell, we've given all these rights, we've legislated them, so we don't need to do more. People are equal." Human rights, he says, "give us the illusion of equality [...] Human rights don't give us equality. What gives us equality is changing people's attitudes" (qtd. in Price) And the attitude we appear to have at the moment is one of 'been there, done that.' In art, we continuously lament the fact it has all been done. In films, everything has been 'redone,' and in terms of human rights, "everything's been protested" (Price). What we are left with is a curious paradox of sorts, where on the one hand the hollow activist image—or 'straw' activist, a term I shall come to elaborate on—has managed to discredit and undermine the influence and validity of equal-rights movements of the 60s. On the other hand, even though all the protest—the myth perpetuates—has achieved very little, contemporary forms of activism are obsolete and overdone in the sense that the issues and goals that are advocated have already been achieved. Equality



Fig. 1, excerpt from Kate Beaton's comic "The Straw Feminists" from her blog, Hark! A Vagrant

is institutionalised. Or, to put it compactly, the message contemporary representation of activism would have you believe is that nothing has been achieved in the past by activist movements—and yet everything has been achieved already. It is this impossible, fantasy-fuelled narrative of what activism has done and can do, that has resulted in the awful trope of the Straw Activist.

When in movies, in television, in literature or any form of media that aims to represent the world it reflects, a single fictionalised character comes to stand for an entire group of people, things tend to get lost in

translation. We have seen this with the Beats turning into Beatniks and the many activists of the 60s becoming ‘those hippies.’ Our 21st century is not by any means lacking in similar misrepresentations of activist movements. To expand on the trope of the Straw Man in general, I heavily rely on vlogger and feminist media critic, Anita Sarkeesian, whose analysis of the ‘Straw Feminist’ trope—I believe—perfectly captures the social structures that allow this problematic trend in popular media.

Just like the regular image of a straw man, the Straw Activist takes a distorted form of what it is meant to represent. It is then filled with a bunch of oversimplifications, “misrepresentations and stereotypes to try to make it easy to discredit or delegitimise” whatever movement the supposed activist represents (Sarkeesian). In the case of feminism, a common character that would be identified as a Straw Feminist would not only serve to undermine and “discredit feminist movements,” but more than that “[serve] to separate female leads which are smart, strong and witty [...] from any association with feminism.” The Straw Man trope seems to have as its only goal, aside a few cheap laughs, proving wrong those which it is meant to mimic and at the same time promote the “fallacy that everyone is equal.” To briefly contextualise the trope, I would like to draw on an example from one of Sarkeesian’s video blogs, in which an excerpt from the 1998 cartoon show *The Powerpuff Girls* is shown. For those unfamiliar, the show centres around three young superhero girls—Bubbles, Blossom and Buttercup. In the excerpt taken from the episode, “Equal Rights,” the clip starts with a pan around Townsville (the home of the three superheroes), showing us that gender inequality is not a problem. The boys get along with the girls, everyone is nice to one another, and—not much else, really. Until the “harmonious balance” is disturbed by the villain named Femme Fatale and her “conniving, deceptive women’s rights rhetoric.” This negative depiction takes place despite the fact that Femme Fatale brings up some pretty interesting points concerning feminist issues of representation, such as—reflexively enough—the lack of female superheroes in pop culture:

Femme Fatale: “Surely, you’ve noticed, female superheroes aren’t nearly as revered as male superheroes.”

Bubbles: “Sure they are! There’s Supergirl, Batgirl...”

Femme Fatale: “They’re so lame, merely extensions of their male counterparts.”²

2. For more information on common female representation in the world of Superheroes, see threatquality.com's post, "Representations of Women in (Mostly Superhero) Comics." <<http://threatquality.com/2010/05/19/representations-of-women-in-comics/>>, or Gracked.com's piece on sexism in superhero costumes <<http://www.cracked.com/blog/the-5-most-ridiculously-sexist-superhero-costumes/>>.

Aside from these interesting points, however, the character quickly disintegrates into oversimplifications and exaggeration. The Girls, influenced by her malicious rhetoric and tendency to see daily, benign things as means of oppressing women, begin to see everything around them as a gender-biased conspiracy. In the fantasy world the writers of *The Powerpuff Girls* have created, one that knows no gender oppression, of course the Girls' reaction would seem exaggerated and needlessly aggressive. By the end of the episode, the Girls are back to their 'right minds' and Femme Fatale is beaten, just as every villain should be. The Straw Feminist, or any form of the Straw activist, is set up to perpetuate and advance the myth that feminism—or activism in general—is no longer necessary. That we have achieved equality, and that anyone who disagrees is by all means an extremist. It is no wonder, then, that we often hear an apologetic tone these days throughout the discourse of ethics.

Another element that must not go unnoticed, one that I have briefly touched on before, is that of *who* gets represented, alongside the problematizing of *misrepresentation*. That is to say, just as the Beats were a form of otherness that was safe and affordable for post-war, homogeneous America, so were the white, middle-class male student activists central to the media's attention in 68 (Hunt 179). Though in years to follow, general politics and equal rights movements were mostly influenced by the either feminist or black activist groups, the ones that are still mentioned at the top of the list when reviewing 68 is the SDS a movement voiced and embodied by white young men of an often privileged background. This is not a matter of *discrediting* those who have been voiced, but

rather questioning the fact that others *have not*. For all in all, a speech on freedom and equal rights cannot help but, when wearing the face of privilege and wealth incarnate, create a sense of decadence and hollow righteousness.

When reflecting back on that representation now, it is painful to see how, when trying to form a narrative with which to talk of the rise and struggle of civil rights activists, the narrative has been reduced to that same middle-class, white-faced repetition of history. Or, in other words: when not appropriating the activist movement as a straw-filled trope, the media uses its mythical middle-class, normalised package to talk about civil right. That is, it is far more comfortable for Western media to tell a story about the oppression and marginalisation of people of colour through the narrative of the ‘helpful white man,’ than to actually allow the story to be told through the voice of the oppressed (Stoddard and Marcus).

Having made our way through the post-war and the hippie-era, the unfortunate backlash of the 80s and 90s that followed, we now arrive at a far more familiar area. Over the past sixty odd years the consumer culture and media coverage that dictates the powers of contemporary representation have grown much, much more complicated, especially given the involvement of internet in the production of information. Media cycles accelerated to the point that “alternative trends were analysed and marketed the instant fringe communities adopted them.” And just like the beatniks and the hippies in their time, our current day ‘hipster’ was—true to form—co-opted by brands “looking to use rebellion to sell products” (Oatman-Standord). What is a hipster? No one can tell, really, not exactly, beyond that we would recognise one if we would see them and are mildly offended when are called one. The real reason hipsters are so easy to vilify, and impossible to identify with, is that they—as the trend would have it—never existed in the first place. The hipster as we know it is an imaginary concept, little else but a pre-packaged collection of trinkets and mannerisms, a “visual style” masquerading as a “full-fledged ideology” (Oatman-Stanford). A closer look would quickly reveal an amalgamation of signifiers and emblems taken from various subcultures: the urban farming and other eco-friendly food movements, DIY and handcraft entrepreneurs, the Occupy movement, artist communities at large—countercultures that at their core oppose the norm, search for ways to live outside the mainstream economy. In an article for *The L Magazine* in 2010, Jonny Diamond argued that this “repackaging of authentic signifiers

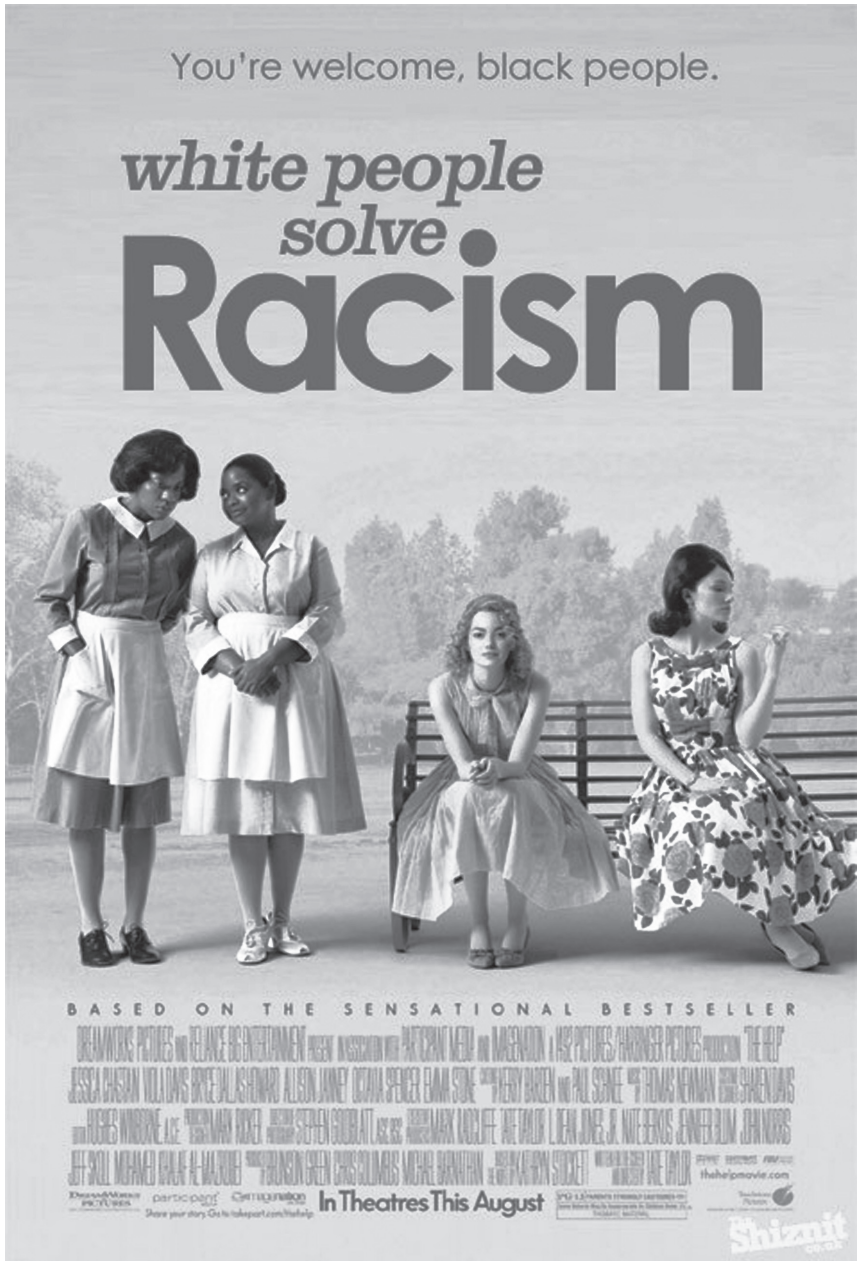


Fig. 2, theshiznit.uk's "If 2012's Oscar-nominated Movie Posters Told the Truth," The Help

for mainstream consumption” is “directly linked to hostility” (qtd. in Oatman-Standard) toward perceived hipsters—or, when extending the line of thought, toward any activist or counterculture movement that has been hollowed out and resold by the media.

Which brings us to the final, arguably also the most important step of this debate concerning representations of activism: if a negative or a lack of representation brings the cause to a halt, how then to continue? To be able to enter that discussion and participate fully, we need the tools with which we can approach activism, or cultural resistance, as a *pedagogical* event (Sandlin and Milam 328). What the previously mentioned forms of activism aim for, bottom line, is change. Change in its most straightforward sense, be it in the way we use language, the way we represent marginalised people, in the way we treat our own bodies in relation to others. For a society to change in a manner so fundamental, there needs to be a shift in the discourse. This shift will not happen on its own accord. Change cannot be *out-waited*. That is what activism is, what it wants at its core: to open up the discussion by vocalising the marginalised, to create a pedagogical moment of *learning* in the audience it reaches, and therein find a possible means for change. Duncombe (2002) explains that when analysing cultural resistance, one must take into account four aspects: the *content* of the resistance, the *form* it takes, the ways it is interpreted, and the activities of its creation. What to do, though, when living in an age where the content has been disempowered, the *form* franchised, the *interpretation* ruled by the iron fist of mass media and the activities of its creation, as a result, mocked at every turn or otherwise appropriated for a reproduction of the norm? Or, in other words, how to fight institutionalised inequality as produced by popular culture, if popular culture breaks you down as you go?

The wonderful quality of popular culture, one that I feel is too often forgotten, is that it is not, as one might feel at times, a one-way street. It may have been in certain moments in the past, in certain parts for certain people, but as it is, for the greater part, the introduction of the internet to our world of media-centrality has opened up the production and *sharing* of information like nothing has before. In a recent essay, Trebor Scholz writes on the development and coming to being of digital activism. In the story he sketches, it is clear to see how activism has always run parallel, if not from *within*, the innovative shareware that came into its own through the 60s and later on with its commercialisation in the mid-1990s (Scholz 30). While the platforms through which activists communicated changed in looks, availability and ownership, the adaptive nature of those who made

use of them did not. Today, as the media has begun to merge with the user-content nature of the online world, new forms of resistance have emerged: resistance that does not, necessarily, attempt to create change from without and fight misrepresentation as it meets it, but a kind that rather tries to change the discourse from within, by claiming back its power through the ingenious manner in which the consumer *dictates the content*. This new form of activism is not, as the idea might suggest, necessarily restricted to the virtual world: it is the mind-set that we the people are creators, as much as consumers, which drives it.

A good example of such a form of resistance is that of the ‘culture jammers.’ Culture jamming is an activity that counters the “continuous, recombinant barrage of capitalist laden messages fed through the mass media” (Handelman 399). The term, first coined in 84 by the San Francisco-based band Negitivland “in reference to the illegal interruption of signals of ham radio” (Carducci 116-38; Darts 313-27), would later on be adopted by many. Of these names the most recognisable probably being Lasn, founder of Adbusters (which would later come to be known as the driving force behind the Occupy Wallstreet movement), described culture-jamming in 1999 as a “metaphor for stopping the flow of consumer-culture-saturated media.” Atkinson (2003) expanding on that idea, explains that culture jamming is “based on the idea of resisting the dominant ideology of consumerism” and advocates the “re-creating commercial culture in order to transform society” (Sandlin and Milam 324-5). This includes, but does not restrict itself to, billboard ‘liberation,’ the creation and dissemination of anti-advertising ‘subadvertisements,’ and participation in the DIY movement. The poster used previously (fig. 2) is one example of a form of culture-jamming: it takes the icons and signifiers of a Hollywood production, just as we have seen Hollywood do with caricatures of people, and turns it on its head. The message, already hollowed out, is not filled up with its original intention, but its new insidious one: it comes to represent the true reality of the role that the ‘straw trope’ has taken up in our discourse. In our current condition of hypercapitalism rounded in consumption, it is a “defiant notion that individuals are capable of and should be responsible for their own entertainment” (Duncombe qtd. in Sandlin and Milam 330). Yet imagining any other structure of grand society that does not break down quickly into wild notions of a post-apocalyptic-like recreation of culture is not easy: we are a consumerist culture, and to criticise culture we must critique the fact that we are part of it as well—not as something to be wiped out, but rather

“included in a new vision of how culture and products will be produced and consumed” (Duncombe 105). In this new vision, it would be the ‘jammers’ who become the cultural producers *and* creators who “actively resist, critique, appropriate, reuse, recreate, and alter cultural products and entertainment” (Sandlin and Milam 331).

Tied in with the idea of *creation* is the artistic element that becomes possible in this ‘jammed’ process of consuming culture. There is space, in the act of subverting the hegemonic stream of media, to experiment with “new ways of seeing and being” (Duncombe 5). Rather than subsume information into a human database, what the consumer can do—according to the culture jammers—is redefine it, reinvent it; be it in the photoshopping of a movie poster or the usage of existing television formats in the making of a critically inclined YouTube channel. The core of it has to be an *awareness* as to what element of the problematic source one is *adopting*, and what element one means to *criticize*. In their in-depth article on the subject, Sandlin and Milam posit that culture jammers are in fact hoping to “turn typically passive activities into *active* ones,” aiming to redefine themselves and “their relationships with consumption, and to redefine possibilities for the future” (331). In this process, popular culture symbols get a new *resistant* meaning, interrupting the way public spaces and public information are used and understood. This, in turn, holds potential for “education to be contemporaneous with social change and identities in the making” (Ellsworth 58). The power in the act of culture jamming lies in the familiarity that viewers already have with the forms of media, making it accessible and less of an attack but rather calling attention to the problematic nature of dominant media ideology (Boyd 123).

However, this approach too is not without fault. The very beginning of this discussion, the perpetuated misrepresentation of marginalised people—the mocking of their cause—leans heavily on the fact that those who are not voiced cannot participate in the creation of information. It is the same idea that applies in practice: you can have equal rights, but if the CEO will not hire women, the change maintains minimal. In media production this trend is paralleled: if you do not have marginalised people getting the chance to tell their story, and being heard, then the dominant narrative will remain. Culture jamming is a good way of flipping that narrative on its head, calling attention to problematic representations, but is not a form of activism accessible or relatable for everyone who wants to contribute to social change. This lack is best felt in certain forms of culture jamming, such as in Reverend Billy’s ‘church of Stop Shopping’ (Sandlin

and Milam 324). The Reverend creates large events where he uses iconic religious routines to criticise mass consumption: exorcizing a cash register at a Victoria's Secret, crucifying a Micky Mouse doll at a Disney store, getting a group of people to strip at a Starbucks, etcetera (Sandlin and Milam 324). The general driving force behind these events appears to be a vague but determined idea that protesting and activism needs to be more 'fun'—that the activists need to show the people who are not yet on their side how 'fun it is to *not* consume.' In this setup, not only is the emphasis on *why* consuming is 'bad' disappearing, but the whole notion of discursive power dynamics is reduced to 'buying is bad and we're better because we take our clothes off at a coffee place!.' More importantly, however, it entirely ignores a history where protesting was the only source of power of self-determination for a grand marginalised group. A group that, by definition, could not *afford* to trivialise their subject matter by portraying it as 'more fun' than the institutionalised norm. This, I believe, is an important difference between those who are trying to jam a culture of consumerism that creates and promotes popular, mainstream values that marginalise their lives or the lives of the people they support (people who cannot *afford* the possibility of being trivialised), and those who try to jam the *physical* act of consuming by attempting to 'win' votes through means of 'fun' activities. These 'fun' activities often reproduce structures of domination and normative discourses (Sandlin and Milam 343), mostly because they are once again created and led by a small group who can afford doing what they do without much social consequences for their own livelihood.

In other words, we must be "mindful of the tendency of critical public pedagogy" to rely too heavily on rationalistic tools that "fail to loosen deep-seated, self-interested investments" based on typically "European, white, male, middle-class, Christian, able-bodied ideas and heterosexual ideals" ("Why doesn't this feel empowering" 310). The issue with certain contemporary forms of cultural criticism, activism and protests is that it relies too heavily on the pedagogical learning moment within "transitional spaces" to bring about change. They are the metaphorical spaces where we "[entertain] strangeness and [play] in difference" (*Places of Learning* 62). The learning moment they contain is similar to the Deleuzian 'in-between' (Reynolds 19-33); the moment of change from who you are to who you might be. The problem with this approach to our society at large, is that it assumes we all need this transitional moment of learning to be able to engage critically, and the moment must be delivered in shocking and sudden ways by some forms of culture jamming. It assumes that

shock and a momentary flipping of binary structures is either sufficient or practical when trying to make for social change. The fact of the matter is: it is not sufficient, or practical, and often works as its own backlash—no media intervention needed. Trebor Scholz recently pointed out that digital activism often runs the risk of becoming “click activism” or “slacktivism,” a kind of “liberal catharsis during lunch break that gives participants the impression that they have done something about the issues when, in fact, their online action had no offline effect at all” (27). This, I believe, extends to other forms of activism that, in their adaption of the spectacle, only create a momentary relief from self-involved doubts on whether or not we are Good People.

The debate surrounding this issue is sticky and very hard to disentangle; every day new forms of communication spring about, new platforms, new apps and alongside that new adaptations of these developments within popular culture. It is hard to be critical of a social movement that you support in principle without calling too much attention to the *critical* part of your argument, running the risk of losing the context at hand. So allow me to finish this essay on a different note: social change has never been a momentary thing. No one wakes up one day after having joined an ‘I’m against Burmese government violence!’ Facebook group and decides, ‘I am never going to make bad or ill-informed decision regarding society again!’ Sexism, racism, classism—these are all structures that are so deeply ingrained in our environment, in our very *language*, that stepping outside of them is a constant, daily decision to *not* be a part of a system that allows and promotes oppression. It is not a matter of stepping over to the side of enlightenment—it is a matter of battling upstream with twenty odd sacks of stones pulling you down. Some people carry less, some more, some lose the weight along the way, but what you are driving toward is always better than what surveys you from along the shore. It is a grand metaphor, but it works for me when I need reminding that I am not on a quest for sudden, radical change but smart, mediated, systematic change. Education is a key word. Price captured the thought neatly in saying that human rights issues in our current political climate should rely as much on education as legislation, and on “rectifying backlashing attitudes that continue to leak into each impressionable generation.” This does not go to say that issues caused by problematic discourses should no longer be dealt with, but rather that there should be more focus on the creation of discourse than there is at the moment. With a broad, interdisciplinary approach to changing narratives from the inside out, society’s view of itself

can change—and, by proxy, its definition of boundaries that separate the Self from the Other.

When talking about cultural criticism or activism in the face of popular culture and mass media, there are—at the end of the day—four things to keep in mind. One, there is no single ‘right’ way to deal with oppression. Two, remain aware on which end of the power structure you are at what moment. Three, it is possible to enjoy a product while remaining critical of it; and four, it is, it really is, worth it.





Fig. 3, another excerpt from Kate Beaton's comic "The Straw Feminists" from her blog, Hark! A Vagrant

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SUMMARY

In the 50s it was the beatniks, the 60s had the hippies, and we—what do we have, really? In this essay, the social role and history of social activism will be sketched out and analysed with an eye on the future. How do we overcome misrepresentations, and how do we shift the creation of information from media-driven dominant ideologies, to the individual? Join me as I search for answers in the depths of popular culture, including (but not restricted to), the Powerpuff Girls, evil cash registers, and the grand invention of the Internet.

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