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AUTHORS: Sevket Sarper Dörter

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70. A for Anonymous V for Viral: Analyzing Online Activism Through Carnavalesque and Politics of Spectacle¹

Şevket Sarper DÖRTER²

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Abstract

This article examines the texts and practices of online activist group 'Anonymous' from the perspective of, 'carnavalesque,' 'détournement,' and 'spectacle' in order to explore the overlaps between the tactics of online resistance and the mass media's strategic containment. Hackers and trolls are pranksters who know the cultural and linguistic values and connotations they work with. Their practices rely on mischief, provocation, and other forms of pranks that generate spectacle both online and offline. Provocation necessitates a keen observation on dominant and popular values in one society. Carnival, as a concept, manifests new formations of togetherness in any given community. With the element of play, community building, and spectacle Anonymous is a countercultural movement in aligned with Theodore Rozsak's conception of the term. Anonymous as a group which started as a collective for online antagonism is a perfect example through which one can observe how countercultural practices reflect and subvert hegemonic discourses. In this article, I argue that through the appropriation of mass media cultural practices, Anonymous' activism reinforces the already-dominant language and symbols in the cultural hegemony of late capitalism. However, by embracing the playful and participatory aspects of carnivalesque, this form of activism holds the potential to transform its 'users' from passive voyeurs of mischief to active political subjects.

Keywords: cultural studies, carnivalesque, online activism, subcultures, trolls

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² Dr., (İstanbul-Türkiye), sarperd@gmail.com, **ORCID ID:** 0000-0001-7160-5136

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tel: +90 505 7958124

phone: +90 505 7958124

Anonymous A'sı Viral'in V'si: Çevrimiçi Aktivizmin Karnavalesk ve Gösteri Siyaseti Üzerinden Analizi³

Öz

Bu makalede çevrimiçi direniş taktikleri ve kitlesel medyanın stratejik ihtivasının üst üste binmesini araştırmak için 'Anonymous' gibi çevrimiçi activist grupların metin ve pratiklerini 'karnavalesk,' 'ters döndürme' ve 'gösteri' kavramlarının perspektifinden inceliyorum. Hacker'lar ve troller kullandıkları kültürel ve dile dair değerleri ve de diğer bağlamları bilen şakacılarıdır. Pratikleri muziplik, provokasyon ve de çevrimiçi ve çevrimdışı gösteri üretecek diğer şakalara dayanır. Provokasyon bir toplumdaki popüler ve baskın değerlerin sıkı bir gözlemini gerektirir. Bir konsept olarak karnaval, herhangi bir toplumda, yeni beraberlik formasyonlarını meydana getirir. Oyun, topluluk kurma ve gösteri ile birlikte Anonymous bir kontra-kültürel harekettir. Çevrimiçi muhalefet için bir kolektif olarak başlayan Anonymous, karşı kültürel uygulamaların nasıl hegemon söylemleri yansıttığını ve ifşa ettiğini gözlemleyebileceğimiz kusursuz bir örnektir. Bu makalede, kitlesel medyanın kültürel pratiklerini gasbederek, Anonymous'un aktivizmi geç dönem kapitalizmin kültürel hegemonyasında hali hazırda baskın olan dil ve sembolleri pekiştirdiğini savunuyorum. Ancak, bu tür aktivizm, karnavaleskin oyuncu ve katılımcı yanlarını kucaklayarak, 'kullanıcılarını' pasif muziplik izleyiciliğinden aktif siyasal önelere çevirme potansiyelini de taşıyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kültürel çalışmalar, karnavalesk, çevrimiçi aktivizm, alt kültürler, troller

1.1. Introduction

In the spring of 2012, thousands of people were filling the streets of Europe and US against the upcoming international treaty called "Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement" (ACTA) which was criticized for having a big potential to damage the freedom of speech and sharing of information on the internet. While thousands were on the streets, a hacker collective called Anonymous hacked the US and EU government websites which were publicizing ACTA. After they breached the systems, they defaced the websites while publishing their message. "If ACTA is signed by all participating negotiating countries [...] a war that will rain torrential hellfire down on all enemies of free speech, privacy and internet freedom" (Cheredar, 2012) said the robotic voice. No hellfire was cast down by the heavens of the internet later but, a strong unity and visibility between the multiplicities all around the world were achieved. Anonymous cooperated with other online groups as well as street movements.

Internet activism has been a countercultural practice for a long time. Yochai Benkler aligns the hacker collective Anonymous with the movements from the 1960s while stating that framing the collective as a national threat might be a wrong approach.

Over the past year, the U.S. government has begun to think of Anonymous, the online network phenomenon, as a threat to national security [...] Media coverage has often similarly framed

³ Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

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Anonymous as a threat, likening it a terrorist organization. Seeing Anonymous primarily as a cybersecurity threat is like analyzing the breadth of the antiwar movement an 1960s counterculture by focusing only on the Weathermen. Anonymous is not an organization. It is an idea, a zeitgeist coupled with a set of social and technical practices. Diffuse and leaderless, its driving force is "lulz" – irreverence, playfulness, and spectacle. (Benkler, 2012)

With the element of play, community building, and spectacle Anonymous is a countercultural movement. I echo Theodore Roszak's definition of counterculture as a form of "rebellion against certain elements of industrial society: the priesthood of technical expertise, the world view of mainstream science and the social dominance of the corporate community – the military-industrial complex" (Roszak quoted in Fischer, 2006: 335). Countercultural groups might improve upon hegemonic practices. Hackers align themselves with network systems to transgress boundaries, closed spaces, and share information on a horizontal plane. Alexander Galloway names the control structure after decentralization as "protocol" in which power is distributed, there is no pivotal hierarchy and control resides in the roots and nodes of a society. Galloway states that hackers (as dissenters) do not escape or isolate from the protocol. "Hackers are protocoological actors par excellence" (Galloway, 2006: 158). Hackers are not just carriers (or manipulators) of information, they also reflect the cultural practices, and texts that they are surrounded with. Hackers are not the only actors of mischief online. Today, trolls generate controversy through misinformation and manipulation online.

Trolls are pranksters who know the cultural and linguistic values and connotations they work with. Gabriella Coleman resembles trolls to the trickster archetype such as Norse god Loki, or Pan in Ancient Greek mythology. Coleman also explains that the "tricksters are much like trolls: provocateurs and saboteurs" (Coleman, 2012a: 115). Provocation necessitates a keen observation on dominant and popular values in one society. Anonymous as a group which started as a collective for online antagonism is a perfect example through which one can observe how countercultural practices reflect and subvert hegemonic discourses. In this article, I argue that through the appropriation of mass media cultural practices, Anonymous' activism reinforces the already-dominant language and symbols in the cultural hegemony of late capitalism. However, by embracing the playful and participatory aspects of carnivalesque, this form of activism holds the potential to transform its 'users' from passive voyeurs of mischief to active political subjects. To unpack how this form of activism mimics corporate language, I discuss Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "carnavalesque" (Bakhtin, 1984) in relation to participatory cultures of spectacle and play in order to present the blurred lines between spectatorship and political activism. As I read Anonymous' trolling incidents as acts of carnivalesque, I also extend this angle of play by discussing the French Situationists and the notion of 'culture jamming' as cultural consumption on the internet is intrinsic to community building, and forming identities. The mimicry of dominant signs and discourses in the media becomes a dual-edged practice: The politics of play and spectacle subvert the hegemonic discourses, yet these forms of activism tend to be strategically contained by the same mass media they oppose against. The romantic perception of the hacker/troll figure in the media makes it attractive for the mass media to replicate their ways of political action, and communication. This romantic perception is also due to the hacker/troll figure's alignment with the myth of the social bandit.

1.2. The New Social Bandit and The Mask

Names such as Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), cyberspace as the New West, and cyber-cowboys suggest that there has always been a parallelism between the hacker and the bandit figures. The co-founder of EFF and former Grateful Dead lyricist J. Perry Barlow looks states nostalgically: "We had this notion of ourselves a Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. It was going to be Mitch and John alone against the governments of the free world! But we felt so electronically amplified we felt we could probably do as well as any other" (Barlow quoted in Paul & Taylor, 2004: 132). The public perception of

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the hacker figure is filtered through a cultural analogy embedded in popular memory. Hacking may be illegal, yet it is often highly romanticized and, in some cases, glorified not only by technological pundits but also by those who are not directly involved. For instance, Helen McLure points towards the positioning of the hacker/troll figure in relation to the myth of the outlaw in the American cultural space.

The cowboy/rebel/outlaw of the electronic frontier is, of course, the hacker, already a somewhat mythical figure in the American collective imagination and able to perform a technological feats and engage in criminal activities in a digital territory that most Americans will never even see, let alone traverse. Like the real cowboy of the Old West, hackers may be regarded with both disdain and admiration. (McLure, 2000: 462)

Despite the controversy that surrounds them, hackers are likened to the old colonial settlers. Similarly, in the article titled “Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age” Esther Dyson presents them as the pioneers of the new frontier of the “cyberspatial exploration” (Dyson, 1996:301). Even Kevin Mitnick, today, is promoted as ‘the world’s most wanted hacker’ who has become professional security advisor (Takahashi, 2011). Hackers are socially glorified outlaws that are parallel to Eric Hobsbawm’s ‘social bandits’ who are reactive to the changing systems and values of the era. Anonymous is no different in this context. As the internet became recentralized, akin to a “shopping mall”, hacktivism became more prominent. It is also important to note that, Hobsbawm puts social banditry strictly in pastoral and parochial boundaries, but he also adds that “Modern world substituted its own banditry” (Hobsbawm, 1981: 24). Hobsbawm also adds that the social bandit can by no means present an alternative to what they have been reacting against: “They are activists and not ideologists or prophets from whom novel visions or plays of social and political organization are to be expected” (Hobsbawm, 1981:24-25). Hackers, much like social bandits, can be instrumentalized for extended political campaigns because they embody the hopes and fears of the communal groups that hackers (or bandits in general) emerge from. Bandits are perceived as ‘the people’s champions’ by their admirers, standing up against corrupt local powers in their eyes.

They are always going about the countryside in impenetrable disguises or in the dress of an ordinary man, unrecognized by the forces of authority until they reveal themselves. To some extent it also reflects the security which bandits have among their people and on their own ground. To some extent it expresses the wish that the people’s champion cannot be defeated, the same sort of wish that produces the perennial myths of the good king – and the good bandit – who has not really died, but will come back one day to restore justice. (Hobsbawm, 1981: 51).

We can draw a line from the point where bandit is perceived as invisible and unbeatable to how Anonymous presents itself. They forge their image as the “good bandit” who are in favour of the “suppressed people” in the hands of the oppressing powers. In 2011, when fourteen Lulzsec hackers were apprehended by the FBI, Anonymous published a statement, quoting the comic book *V for Vendetta* (Moore & Lloyd, 2018): “Any attempt to [stop us] will make your citizens angrier until they roar in one gigantic choir. It is our mission to help these people, and there is nothing – absolutely nothing – you can possibly do to make us stop” (Gjelten, 2011). The hacker figure embodies a social justice figure who is perceived as a romantic outlaw that is determined to correct the wrongs of the past: “We become bandits on the Internet because you have forced our hand. The Anonymous bitchslap rings through your ears like hacktivism movements of the 90s. We’re back – and we’re not going anywhere. Expect us” (Anonymous quoted in Seifert, 2011). The nostalgic touch of the statement positions the hacker collective in relation to the long lineage of hackers, and even modern bandits. The social bandit myth that surrounds the collective’s identity is further emphasized by their appropriation of Guy Fawkes masks.

Anonymous repurposed the Guy Fawkes masks from the film *V for Vendetta* (McTeige, 2006). The story portrays a surveillance state which rules its citizens with an iron fist. The protagonist crafts his identity

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by the revolutionary figure 'V' who wears the mask of Guy Fawkes who is known for his attempt to assassinate the King of England on November 5th, 1605. Brian L. Ott analyzes the rhetoric of the film as urging and empowering. "As political rhetoric, *V for Vendetta* urged their viewers not to passively sit by as their rights and liberties were being curtailed, and empowered viewers to question and speak out against their government" (Ott, 2010: 49). The movie adaptation came in 2006 which is also the year when Anons started the Chanology movement and started street protests against the Church of Scientology. Ott emphasizes how movies have the capacity to evoke certain emotions through the influence of collective and individual memories: "Films function much like rooms do... In experiencing a film, one's body both (1) responds to the discursive and figural elements of the film and (2) recalls *previous cinematic or non-cinematic experiences*, which in combination evoke affective responses. (Ott, 2010: 49. Emphasis added). The masks' copyrights belonged to the Warner Brothers, the mask and its connotations were re-appropriated. With Anonymous, the mask signified the symbol of online dissent. Ironically, the mask initially represented the meme titled 'Epic Fail Guy' on the imageboards. Before Chanology and Operation Scientology started, the mask was framed as the naiveté symbol of the young middle-class rebellion. During the protests against the Church of Scientology, the group reclaimed the humorous symbol the teenage angst. Coleman states the rationale for the mask's popularity: "Well known, easy to purchase, and imbued with an undeniable symbolic energy – both on account of its history and its more recent iteration – The Guy Fawkes mask became the mask de jour to deter the prying eyes of Scientology" (Coleman, 2015: 64). The collective re-appropriated the cheap film merchandise into an icon of dissent and youth subculture. This transformation between to symbolic states places the mask into an ambivalent zone where "...mainstream art can be politically progressive and counter-hegemonic" (Ott, 2010: 48). Even though the comic book adaptation was a Hollywood production, its affect has exacerbated its original marketing means. From the same perspective, Anonymous' viral and branded activism can also be used against the mass media itself.

1.3. The Headless Corporate Man and Branded Activism

The visual texts that are produced by Anonymous have a distinct, not unique, but an authentic aesthetic derived from meme culture, which originated in online imageboards. The robotic voice, masked-men in hoods, gritty and distorted VHS tape lines in the visuals, and the headless corporate man logo remind the viewer of a blockbuster thriller movie. While corporate marketing often involves advertising agencies with substantial budgets, Anonymous, wields grassroots media power, despite its limited human resources. Their ways of spreading their message to the millions imitate the publicity practices of the mass media. Dennis W. Allen calls this type of dissent a "form of resistance that mimics the media-savvy nature of corporate capitalism itself" (Allen, 2015: 10). The hacktivist group has a memorable name that carries an air of mist with it, moreover they have a distinct language and visual style. The logo became identical with online activism. In their public announcements, the logo appears in the centre of the screen and typically remains visible until the robotic voice message is completely read. The event, the subculture's identity, and the memory of the corporate imagery overlap in a palimpsest of multimedia. Michael Kirby and Sheng Kuan Chung argue that logos convey identities along with the narratives that surround them: "Logos are omnipresent in contemporary visual and media culture mainly because they can be used to identify a business entity, product or service instantly and effectively, and to promote a company's public image. Logos are typically more accessible than linguistic modes of communication" (Chung & Kirby, 2009: 35). Anons themselves do not have fame, however the logo and the mask have.

The online and offline protests they employ are conducted by mimicking the corporate communication tactics. In the past, similar approaches towards visibility have been experimented by art and

performance groups such as Rtmark from the early 1990s. Similar to Anonymous, they do not have a specific spokesperson or a leader, but they have their own logo and distinct style.

In approaching the problem of opposing corporate power, we immediately had to acknowledge that corporate power is different, essentially and perceptually, from the government power against which there is such a long and varied tradition of resistance. Corporate power is alien and faceless, a disembodied, unlocalized, inhuman force that constantly thrusts itself upon us, but has only a multitude of seemingly dissociated aims and no position we can count on, or against which we can fight. (Rtmark, 2000)

Rtmark crafted their protest tactics and strategies around mimicking the corporate marketing schemes: They, too, were faceless, decentralized, and communicated through viral key visuals. Instead of negating the corporate strategies in communication, they incorporated the visual cultures of late capitalism into their public presentation. In terms of public perception, logos surpass the human labour which runs behind the scenes as they forge their myth into the public memory as a unified and singular voice. Anonymous is no different in this manner. Behind the mask, or the logo, there are thousands of hackers, trolls, and active participants. One self-alleged Anon writes to *Dazed* magazine: “We have no leaders, civilians or soldiers. We are all one. We run operations because that is what the group decides to do... We’re called cowards and posers for hiding behind the masks, but who is the real poser? We take away the face and leave only the message” (Anonymous in *Dazed*, 2012). In the age of surveillance, the mask may imply invisibility tactics, however I would argue that this branded activism also boosts the viral quality of the movement. Anons take away the face and substitute it with a constructed image that is simply way powerful. Allen underlines the attractive part of anonymity in activism of Rtmark: “Anonymity not only has practical advantages...but is, itself a marketing tool. Unlike “pimpled and ill-dressed identities anonymity give [*Anonymous*] the sexy air of the secret agent” (Allen, 2015: 11-12). Through anonymity, the stereotype of an asocial, introvert young male hacker/troll who lives in their parents’ basement is substituted with the myth of the social bandit. The branding not only facilitates the the spread of the message but also establishes a distinct form of recognition within the public and mass media. As Lance Bennett and Taso Lagos point out “Activists are learning to tap into personal identification with brands and recognizing the importance of lifestyles as the organizers of personal meaning in everyday life” (Bennett & Lagos, 2007: 195). From this perspective, participation in activist events can lead to self-identification processes within the collective. What the logo represents to activists goes beyond a fleeting moment of visibility: It creates a subculture that young protestors can identify with. This approach is nothing new to the mass media agents. The attraction-inducing, and desire-shaping visual language aside, political campaigns and brand strategies revolve around community building approaches. As a part of the history of online subcultures, Anons are capable of subverting top-down messages, create spectacle and gather attention as they transform passive voyeurs of mischief into active participants in online politics. Regarding the intersection between brand management and political campaigning, Margaret E. Farrar and Jamie L. Warner state that they “understand that politicians’ phrasing and word choice is tested in focus groups; we are fully accustomed to hearing political strategists talk unselfconsciously about political parties or candidates as “brands” (Farrar & Warner, 2008: 276). In this regard, such forms of activism can be regarded as ‘branded’ activism which mimics and re-appropriates the corporate communication strategies to create spectacle, gather the attention of millions in a playful manner. In fact, play becomes a key role in the politics of spectacle as it (a) involves a meaning-making process, and (b) requires active engagement and participation with cultural text and practices, rather than just passive observation.

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1.4. Play and Spectacle

'Lulz' is a distorted version of the online abbreviation "lol" that is laughing-out-loud gesture in text. In the hacker/troll subcultural context, lulz is not just an abbreviation. Lulz informs the guiding principles of the hacker/troll for their actions online. For Coleman, lulz "are sometimes coy and playful, sometimes macabre and sinister" (Coleman, 2012b: 84). Whitney Phillips also adds that "Lulz is similar to Schadenfreude – loosely translated from German as revelling in the misfortune of someone you dislike – but has much sharper teeth" (Phillips, 2015:20). During "Operation Scientology" Anons have phone pranked the Scientology churches, order unpaid pizzas, sent nude parts to church's fax machines and jammed their websites through DDOS attacks (Coleman, 2012b: 87). Of course, such online pranks are not something new. Before Project Chanology started and Anonymous evolved into a political hacktivist group, the young generation of users have already been a part of the online prankster subcultures in the late 1990s and early 2000s. People would prank online communities, cause linguistic battles, attack the online visibility of brands, and so on. Lulz, by the nature of pranks, is outcome dependent. The reaction that the trolls receive informs the the impact and the size of the lulz.

One of the trolling events the Anons have initiated was in 2007 when they decided to spam the public mail of Oprah Winfrey's TV Show which focused on child abuse at that day. The Anon used "Over 9000" joke which was a reference from the cartoon show "Dragon Ball Z" in such a grotesque way that the editors could not let it go. Oprah read a part of the mail live: "He does not forgive. He does not forget...and he has over 9000 penises" (LOLPRAH, 2008). The juvenile male sense of humour hijacked the show, and 'lulz' were achieved. Winfrey, the directors and the millions of people watching the show did now know that they were tricked. Even though Anonymous turned political in the later years, lulz was still perceived as the biggest outcome or one of the instruments of dissent in the group.

Lulz has always stood in a morally gray area. At times, these pranks were mostly harmless jokes that were meant to amplify impact of the demonstrations or the entire activist campaign. Thousands of Anons took to the streets wearing their Guy Fawkes masks and carrying placards that read "Don't Worry We're from the Internet". Later, some of them even queued up to take Scientologist stress test. However, in the case of Operation Bart, Anonymous targeted a rather sensitive area. When Bay Area Rapid Transit System (BART) decided to shut down cell phone signals during a protest on August 11, Anonymous unleashed a wave of fury. They DDOSed the websites, servers and they exposed private information to the public. One of the leaked information was BART's spokesperson Linton Johnson's semi-naked photo with a man in a night club: "If you are going to be a dick to the public, then I'm sure you don't mind showing your dick to the public" said the Anon who uploaded the pictures online (Anon quoted in Coleman, 2015: 8). The incident caused an uproar within the community due to ethical concerns; "That's a very low road to take sir" tweeted another Anon under the original leak. Despite the inner conflicts and arguments, utilizing pranks (no matter how dark they can be) have always been a weapon for the community. The element of play entails active participation, instead of being a passive spectator in the face of the events. Furthermore, the play has a levelling effect for the eyes of the activist. In play, vertical hierarchies are toppled down in favour of a horizontal communal experience. Lulz as a guiding principle for the Anon community echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "carnavalesque". For Bakhtin, carnival works as a unifying force which invites for active engagement and contribution in one community.

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. [...] Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people, they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. (Bakhtin, 1984: 7)

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Carnival, as a concept, is a liminal time-space in which not only the social hierarchies are blended, but also the social roles within one given society become blurry. Carnival imposes its own experience of time and does not allow any porosity with the extra-communal experience. Carnival has its own guiding principles that shape and inform the community it belongs. As carnivals undermine set hierarchies and traditional practices, they also generate social potentialities that have transformative effects. José Laners points out that “carnival and ritual laughter are linked with destruction and regeneration” (Laners, 2001: 92). This dual relationship of laughter parallels the concept of ‘lulz’ in which various forms of creative destruction manifest spaces for play and participation, all while creating a spectacle that captures the attention of the mass media. In regard to the reversal of the social roles during the carnivals of the medieval times, Craig J. Thompson states that; “the medieval carnival was a configuration of space and time in which oppressive rule was forced to confront the irrepressible will of the people” (Thompson, 2007: 116). Such carnivalesque confrontations usually release the valve pressure in one given society. However, the participatory aspect of carnival acclimatizes people for active socio-political engagement within their community.

Through its community-building capacities, the participatory power of play challenges power structures in the long run. Benjamin Shepard underlines the useful points of play for the social movements (Shepard et al., 2008). They argue that “the aim of the movement organizing is to create not only an external solution to problems, but to create communities of support and resistance” (Shepard et al., 2008: 3). Without building a community of support, any act of resistance becomes an individual expedition. Play creates co-ordination between activists as being a collective empowers the activists in the face of demoralizing counter-resistance: “Perhaps more than anything, play and political performance create spaces where activists feel compelled to challenge seemingly insurmountable targets” (Shepard et al., 2008: 10). With the dawn of online hacking communities in the 1980s, with the help of the new personal computers, institutions that represented power (banks, schools, government and non-government organization) were challenged through play. The attraction of this activity to hackers, both in the past and today, lies in how it fosters a sense of playfulness within the community, and the emergence of more engaging spectacular experiences.

Lulz play a role in both the collective and individual memories of Anons. Whitney Phillips argues that the concept of lulz has evolved into a set of shared experiences that transgress the boundaries between consumption and production: “Within the community play frame, all reading is writing, and all reception is creation; to recognize an in-joke is to participate in community formation, and to participate in community formation is to ensure community growth” (Phillips, 2015: 31). The disregard towards this duality generative can be read as Bakhtin’s deconstruction of destructive and regenerative binaries. Regarding the attraction of lulz Colman states: “Such acts of lulzmaking are magnetic on two levels, producing spectacular shocking, and humorous events and images that attract media attention while simultaneously binding together the collective and rejuvenating its spirit” (Coleman, 2012b: 91). Memes and pranks gather attention from the mass media and the general public. The earned attention unifies Anons even further as their actions are acknowledged by a bigger collective. The trolls’ and hackers’ politics of attention is fuelled by this validation, and in return Anons transgress or participate more in the community. This cycle manifests an identity through which Anons practice and express their loyalty. This is where Anonymous’ activism and the corporate marketing strategies overlap. For similar reasons above, the mainstream media culture relies on the spectacle as much as Anonymous does. Baz Kershaw underlines this dependency: “The near ubiquitous mass media and then the new pleasure-zones of consumption theatricalize experience by turning the everyday into an immersive spectacle of increasing over-production, in which people become spectators of themselves as participants in an emergent cultural (dis)order” (Kershaw, 2003:604). The emergent cultures of late capitalism borders between the

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liminality between production and consumption, thereby rendering individuals as parts of certain market-communities that generate value for the market. In this barrage of texts that surround everyday practices and cultural imaginaries, French situationists and other culture jamming activists that carry that tradition today weaponize the same visual and textual communication-sphere by subverting them for radical means.

1.5. Culture Jamming and Mass Media Activism

Détournement, which was practiced by French activists known as 'The Situationists' in the 1950s, was a concept that was spearheaded by prominent figures like Guy Debord and Gil Wolman at the forefront of the avant-garde movement. The approach of détournement urges to re-wire, re-route, and re-appropriate what has already been established or structured by the cultural hegemony of any given place. Debord and Wolman argue that language, as language is a site of contestation, literary and cultural texts that shape and inform cultural imaginaries can be subverted and presented to the general public without their anticipation. They state that "literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propaganda purposes" (Debord & Wolman in Knabb, 2006:15). Détournement is the creative act of changing the experience one gets from any text by subverting certain elements of that select text in a radicalized fashion. As Stuart Hall argues that textuality and representation are sites of power, and the symbolic is a source of identity (Hall, 1992: 283). From this perspective, détournement is a reclamation of the symbolic at a grassroots level.

Culture jamming, as a political act, aims to subvert the instruments of the mass media. Through replicating the tactics and the strategies of mass communication, culture jammers subvert content in order to liberate it from its market-based connotations. Farrar and Warner refer to this act of culture jamming as "media sabotage" (Farrar & Warner, 2008: 280). The practice resembles what Umberto Eco defines as "semiological guerrilla warfare":

So for the strategic solution it will be necessary, tomorrow, to employ a guerrilla solution. What must be occupied, in every part of the world, is the first chair in front of every TV set (and naturally, the chair of the group leader in front of every movie screen, every transistor, every page of newspaper). If you want a less paradoxical formulation, I will put it like this: The battle for the survival of man as responsible being in the Communications Era is not to be won where the communication originates, but where it arrives. (Eco, 1967: 142-143)

Instead of focusing on seizing the means of mass communication, Eco proposes to shift the focal point of struggle to where the message is being received, read, and reproduced. Eco's proposition stems from the negation of the notion of a passive receiver. If reading is an active process, the site of struggle should shift towards where the message can be re-purposed for the benefit of the mass public. Instead of challenging the corporate context from above, Eco advocates for a bottom-up approach to subversion. This way, the receiver further participates in the meaning-making process, thereby exercising their agency within their community. One of the avant-garde figures in culture jamming, Kalle Lasn undermines the idea of an independent individual agency against the forces of mass production by pointing out how public opinion can be manufactured and manipulated on the level of production: "ideas, expressions and concerns of individual citizens no longer matter very much... Culture isn't created from bottom up by the people anymore – it's fed to us top-down by corporations" (Lasn, 2000: 189-190). Despite Lasn's gloomy take on the potentiality of the individual agency in the free market place of ideas, he is not determinist at all. From his perspective, corporate mimicry and détournement are simply required.

Matthew Soar asks rhetorically: "If graphics, ads and commercials are often so abundant in ideological cant, why not pay attention to the activities and beliefs of the highly skilled group that creates them?" (Soar, 2010:586). In this respect, despite its socially harmful flaws, I read Anonymous as an extension

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of culture jamming collectives. Culture jammers denaturalize what the mass media has naturalized through re-purposing the originally encoded message with play and spectacle. Furthermore, culture jammers, like Anonymous depend on spectacle in order to reach out and grow their communities. Vince Carducci also makes an analogy between the hacker ethos and culture jamming. Carducci states that as hackers try to reach the source code of a protected cyber entity, “culture jamming, exposing the ‘source code’ of commodity aesthetics...is an attempt to get at the authentic nature of goods in order to pass sovereign judgment over them” (Carducci, 2006: 127). Carducci argues that culture jammers estrange the consumers by demystifying the production processes, and the cultural codes that surround a product. Similarly, by mimicking the corporate ways of sabotage, exposure, and electronic assaults to private systems Anonymous also exposes the manufacture of alienation inherent in corporate mass media practices.

Former federal CEO of the security company HBGary, Aaron Barr claimed that he had the real identities of Anonymous members, and he was going to sell them to the FBI after a public statement. However, Barr did not know that the names he acquired at the time were false. Upon his claim, Anonymous penetrated the security company’s defence systems. What the hacking group found was a PowerPoint sheet, which covers disinformation tactics and strategies against Wikileaks. Even though HBGary is a private security company, they were operating as if they were a government intelligence branch. Anonymous published their message on HBGary’s website: “It would appear that security experts are not expertly secured” (Anon quoted in Rosoff, 2011). Anonymous made the sixty-thousand corporate emails public. By exposing those emails and mocking the capabilities of the company in front of the mass media, Anonymous mimicked what HBGary claimed that they could achieve. After the public spectacle and humiliation that came out of this incident, the CEO was relieved from his position.

The politics of spectacle is an area where hegemonic forces of mass media and grassroots movements contest with each other. This contestation also reveals an overlap between the two parties, as they are both informed by the same political economy. Whitney Phillips underlines that both trolls and media push for success as they are invested in the spectacle (Phillips, 2015: 68). Anon culture reflects the corporate brand culture and practices, though they do not aim to entirely undermine the mass media. As I have discussed above, the politics of spectacle targets public attention over a strategic, structural public policy change. Play and participation are crucial for community-building and activating passive bystanders. However, culture jamming tactics of resistance are also prone to be contained by the mass media in the long term. Henry Jenkins points out this co-dependency between the grassroots collectives and the corporate media:

The new political culture... reflects the pull and tug of...two media systems: one broadcast and commercial, the other narrowcast and grassroots. New ideas and alternative perspectives are more likely to emerge in the digital environment, but the mainstream media will be monitoring those channels looking for content to co-opt and circulate. Grassroots media channels depend on the shared frame of reference created by the traditional intermediaries... (Jenkins, 2006: 222)

Much like trolls who subvert the content they consume online; the corporate mass media studies these subcultures for marketing purposes. After all, as I have discussed earlier, carnivalesque practices are both good for spectacle and community-building. Eventually, the ‘liberated’ signs and practices of such subcultures are appropriated for other means. The activism that uses this language has a similar structure. The only difference of Anonymous from other culture jamming collectives is that, unlike Lasn who denounces the effectiveness of street protests, Anonymous does not aim to substitute the physical immediacy and impact of direct action with their online playfulness. Just as in the case of Scientology protests, Anonymous acted as a catalyst for the primary street events. Culture jammers, on the other hand, usually present themselves as alternative to street protestors. While it is true that the general

public consensus is an area which is contested upon many professional and state-based competitors. However, it is naïve to question the effectiveness of strikes, direct political action, and re-appropriation of not online, but physical public spaces, in favour of online spectacles. As Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter stress, “We do not live in the spectacle. The world that we live in is in fact much more prosaic...The culture cannot be jammed because there is no such thing as “the culture” or “the system” (Heath & Potter, 2005: 10). While adopting a countercultural approach in political campaigning is attractive, if it becomes an end itself, hacktivism may devolve into nothing more than a marketing tool.

1.6. Conclusion

Anonymous as an activist collective is double-edged sword. As hackers and trolls, they tap onto the myth of the social bandit and gain the sympathy of a wider audience. This myth of the social bandit works best when the collective strikes against a more powerful target. Furthermore, through their use of carnivalesque tactics and play, they transform bystanding users to active participants in online and offline communities. However, focusing on creating spectacles can divert political action away from demanding structural transformation in society. The mimicry of corporate language and practices can work in both directions: They can be subverted for political campaigning, but at the same time, the short-term forms of resistance tend to be appropriated for marketing purposes in the long term. Both online activist groups, such as Anonymous, and corporate mass media follow and study each other due to their peripheral relationship. Despite this relationship, the element of play carries a certain potentiality in challenging mass apathy. Apathy relies on the alienation of the individual against the forces of mass production. Communities, on the other hand, requires participation and active engagement with the collective. Carnival, as a concept, manifests new formations of togetherness in any given community. Since the vertical hierarchies are toppled within a certain time and place, the members of the collective are transformed from being passive spectators. The carnivalesque spectacle manifested by Anonymous, while not without its flaws, plays a crucial role in generating collective engagement. This transformative potential extends beyond the realm of mere play and spectacle; it acclimatizes community members to becoming active political subjects. As a result, Anonymous holds the capacity to bring about significant social transformation among its followers.

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