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# Banksy at Disneyland: Generic Participation in Culture Jamming

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Many thanks to all of my colleagues and mentors at the University of the Pacific; special thanks to my fiancé Kelly Marie Lootz.

# **Banksy at Disneyland: Generic Participation in Culture Jamming**

Joshua Carlisle Harzman

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*Culture jamming is a profound genre of communication and its proliferation demands further academic scholarship. However, there exists a substantial gap in the literature, specifically regarding a framework for determining participation within the genre of culture jamming. This essay seeks to offer such a foundation and subsequently considers participation of an artifact. First, the three elements of culture jamming genre are established and identified: artifact, distortion, and awareness. Second, the street art installment, Banksy at Disneyland, is analyzed for participation within the genre of culture jamming. This study finds that Banksy at Disneyland successfully participates within the genre, which subsequently engenders new implications for both culture jamming and rhetorical theory.*

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Culture jam is a profound genre of communication and its proliferation demands further academic scholarship. Twenty-first century U. S. America is a world inundated with corporate, cultural, and institutional symbolization. While most persons readily consume these icons, a small few distort them in order to craft new meanings of their own. Culture jamming is an act of alteration in which a widely known artifact is transformed in an attempt to reroute the original meaning and engender awareness amongst audiences (Lasn, 1999). The practice is a tactic of counter-cultures, using culture jamming to embolden messages of anti-corporatism, civil disobedience, political progressivism, and resistance. Culture jamming is not a narrow genre; its proponents use a wide array of tactics that infiltrate most modern media. Famed British artist, Banksy<sup>1</sup> (2010), illustrates counter messages through graffiti, live performance, and street art installations. This essay seeks to investigate to what extent one particular art piece, *Banksy at Disneyland*,<sup>2</sup> participates within the genre of culture jamming.

On September 11, 2006, Banksy skillfully installed *Banksy at Disneyland* at the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad themed ride at Disneyland in Anaheim, California. The piece consisted of an inflatable mannequin dressed in an orange jumpsuit, black gloves, and a black hood covering its face; the figure was

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1 As Banksy's identity remains unknown, I maintain neutral pronouns when addressing the artist. For example: they and their, instead of him or her.

2 I use the phrase *Banksy at Disneyland* to situate the artifact of this study.

I would like to acknowledge the many folks who helped this essay come to fruition. To begin, I want to recognize my parents—Connie Lynn Heese and Bradley Earl Harzman—for their continued dedication and support. Additionally, I want to thank my colleagues and professors at the University of the Pacific, including Drs. Teresa Bergman, Paul Turpin, Qingwen Dong, and Marlin C. Bates IV, as well as Steven Farias. Lastly, thank you to my partner and best friend, Kelly Marie Lootz.

positioned on its knees, with its hands and feet bound. The installation remained in place for 90 minutes before the ride was closed and the street art removed. A spokeswoman for Banksy noted that the piece was conceived to spotlight the plight of detainees at the United States' prison in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba (BBC, 2006). Immediately following the installation, Banksy featured the footage as a short film at their L.A. exhibition, *Barely Legal* (Bowes, 2006). *Banksy at Disneyland* encompasses both the original installment of the piece and its online presence. While the piece lasted only an hour and a half, the installation was captured on video, uploaded to YouTube, and covered by mainstream news outlets such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the New York Times (Nath, 2013; Wyatt, 2006). Even today, curious audiences may view the piece and its installation in the documentary entitled, *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (Banksy, 2010). *Banksy at Disneyland* gained widespread viewership through each of these respective platforms. Moreover, the text maintains an eternal online presence for audiences across the globe.

Culture jamming scholarship is growing in popularity within contemporary communication studies. A refined focus of the genre, as I intend to offer in this essay, is pertinent for many reasons. Initially, this study contributes a conceptual interpretation and refinement of culture jamming to communication theory through a lens of genre criticism methodology. Establishing a foundation of the genre can better serve future scholars in critical investigation of culture jamming and its merits. Second, this study explores the political and social implications of *Banksy at Disneyland*, which adds to the culture jamming archive. Third, only through understanding the text can scholars discern the terministic screens of Banksy and subsequent insights into the artist's worldview. As Banksy remains a globally preeminent street artist, investigating *Banksy at Disneyland* offers a glimpse into the notable contemporary issues that the artist seeks to challenge. With a sizable following, understanding the worldviews that Banksy promotes through their art offers an insight into contemporary ideologies worldwide.

## Genre Criticism

Genre participation has been a function of rhetorical criticism since Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. The Grecian scholar emphasized that rhetoric took one of three forms deliberative, epideictic, or forensic (Aristotle, 2001). Each of these modes maintained communication of public deliberation pertaining to policy, character, and judgment. Edwin Black (1968) helped to embolden the practice of identifying genres by noting that certain audiences will require distinct responses from the rhetor. The recurrence of particular types of situations offers information to rhetorical critics regarding the available responses for each setting. The critic must find unity in the genre, as artifacts take on various forms. Similarly, to deem a situation as rhetorical, the rhetor must be able to adapt within the audience constraints (Bitzer, 1970). Additionally, a genre type is identified by a "fusion of forms" and not by its individual elements (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978, p. 21). It is in a similarity of techniques, rather than content, that genres of rhetorical criticism come to fruition.

Furthermore, Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986) work on genre studies offers a fruitful conception of a communication tactic that exists as fluidly as culture jamming. The author notes that in our most free and unrestrained dialogues, we speak in definitive generic forms. Sometimes these communication techniques are more rigid, while other times they are more creative. Establishing and understanding genres—why particular situations call for particular styles—has long existed as a practice of rhetorical criticism. In an effort to demonstrate this notion, rhetorician Sonja K. Foss (2009) offers a blueprint for the methods of proposing a genre criticism. According to Foss,

“Generic description involves four steps: (1) observing similarities in rhetorical responses to particular situations; (2) collecting artifacts that occur in similar situations; (3) analyzing the artifacts to discover if they share characteristics; and (4) formulating the organizing principle of the genre” (p. 141).

As rhetors develop messages, genres introduce opportunities to bolster the strength of their message or to craft new ones altogether. Foss further articulates that rhetorical participation will maintain the genre's situational requirements, include the substantive and stylistic characteristics, and promote the organizing principal. Each of these variables ought to be fulfilled in order to ground a rhetorical genre such as culture jamming. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate what attributes constitute a communication artifact as a culture jam as well as to what extent *Banksy at Disneyland* participates within the genre.

## Culture Jamming

As advertising and corporatism flood the public sphere in the industrialized West, activists resist these norms through a variety of tactics. In particular, the practice of culture jamming offers a communication platform to those whose voices reside in the periphery. The concept originates from the unique, audio-collage and billboard alteration techniques of the band Negativland (Dery, 1990). In its essence, culture jamming involves the distortion of an artifact in order to voice a critique. Whether an audio file or a billboard, one of the earliest academic authors on culture jamming Mark Dery (2010) explains,

Jamming was the joke-y, trollish, then prevalent in the C.B. radio community, of disrupting other users' conversations with obscene or nonsensical interjections; billboard banditry is the neo-Situationist practice of illegally altering billboards to perversely funny, usually political effect in order to critique consumerism, capitalism, representations of race and gender in advertising, or American foreign policy. (para. 2)

While culture jamming found its roots in audio media, its rapid ascension into billboard manipulation foreshadowed the tactic's versatility. In some of the earliest culture jamming techniques, activists used spray cans in order to recreate billboard messages. By changing slogans, these jammers hoped to startle viewers into thinking differently about the original messages (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009).

Through this asymmetric communication technique, artists expose the oppressive nature of institutions through the modification of widely recognized symbols.

Founder of *Adbusters* magazine, Kalle Lasn (1999), promotes his text *Culture Jam* as both an historical account of the concept and a quasi-manifesto for aspiring jammers. Lasn notes that jamming is a means to bolster awareness and public discourse in order to inspire social or political change. One major inspiration behind culture jamming was the work of the Situationists in twentieth century France, led by Guy Debord. Their practice of *detournement*, literally translated as a “turning around,” emphasized a distortion of arousing imagery and spectacle, in order to reverse and subsequently reclaim their meanings (Lasn, 1999, p. 103). The genre, at its core, is about illustrating a critique of the status quo. As a result, an act of culture jamming is reliant upon a pre-existing artifact that is allegedly deserving of rejection. Similar to the concept of *bricolage*, an act of culture jamming involves the modification of pre-existing messages that resonate throughout society (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). According to Klein (2000), “Artists will always make art by re-configuring our shared cultural languages and references” (p. 178). Overtime those experiences shift and a different set of challenges emerge that bring question to the way freedom of expression is defined in a branded culture. Rather than starting from scratch, culture jamming is a communication tactic that relies on the renown of an icon.

As a communication genre, culture jamming is expansive and subsequently has many names: culture jamming, guerilla semiotics, and subvertising, to name a few (Dery, 1990). Since its inception, scholars have expanded the genre with great alacrity. Culture jamming has been promoted as a positive inspiration in art pedagogy (Darts, 2004), critical adult education (Sandlin, 2007), youth development (Lambert-Beatty, 2010), and student activism (Frankenstein, 2010). Additionally, communication scholars have explored the rhetorical implications of a culture jamming genre. The practice can be considered an act of resistance, but can also be associated with a higher sense of pranking for praxis (Harold, 2004). Television shows such as *The Daily Show* engage in a false reality that posits a political culture jam, stalling normative political branding messages (Warner, 2007). Others have emphasized the genre’s capacity to stimulate agenda building (Robinson & Bell, 2014). A genre of culture jamming is evident within communication scholarship. Still, a gap in literature exists when considering what constitutes as an act of culture jamming.

Contemporary academic work on culture jamming illustrates the genre’s wide reach. It is my contention that culture jamming entails an act of rhetorical criticism in which highly recognizable artifacts are distorted in an effort to raise awareness. It is the fame of a pre-existing icon that gives power to its modified state via culture jamming; with the end goal of activists seeking to challenge the salience of oppression that these artifacts represent (Lasn, 1999). In an effort to ground the fundamental tenants of the genre, five culture jamming artifacts were examined: *Ella Watson* by Gordon Parks (1942), *Read My Lips* by Gran Fury (1988), *iRaq* by Copper Greene (2004), *The Right to Life* by Hans Haacke (1979), and *Think disillusioned* by the Billboard Liberation Front (1989). Each of these artifacts are

readily available in the 2009 text, *Practices of Looking*, by Maria Sturken and Lisa Cartwright. These culture jams were selected for audience accessibility, but more importantly, their proximity allows for a substantial analysis. A close reading of the aforementioned culture jams illuminates three decisive elements that constitute participation within the genre: artifact, distortion, and awareness.

Initially, culture jamming is contingent on the situational requirement of an artifact—an image, sound, or other symbolic representation of a larger corporation, event, institution, location, person, etc. In *Ella Watson*, the photo mimics the iconic *American Gothic* painting; *Read My Lips* uses the highly popularized statement by President George W. Bush; *The Right to Life* draws from pro-life messages; *iRaq* uses Apple's signature title design (iPod, iPad, etc.); *Think disillusioned* capitalizes on Apple's distinguished catch phrase 'Think Different.' In all of these culture jams, the rhetor utilizes the situational requirement of a popular artifact, as culture jamming necessitates the use of a preexisting symbol.

Next, the substantive and stylistic characteristic of a culture jamming genre is distortion. It may be the hegemonic notoriety of an artifact that draws audiences in, however, culture jamming acts to distort the original message. *Ella Watson* is illustrative of the iconic *American Gothic* painting, yet, only one person resides within the frame. A broom and mop replace the farm tools and the subject stands in front of a U. S. American flag. Both *Read My Lips* and *The Right to Life* juxtapose the sound bites of conservative rhetoric with progressive causes—the AIDS epidemic amongst queer populations and women's reproductive rights. Green's *iRaq* resembles an Apple advertisement, but imposes an Abu Ghraib prisoner being electrocuted. Lastly, *Think disillusioned* distorts an original billboard catchphrase by hijacking the advertisement's space and inserting "disillusioned." Distortion by activists may be illustrated digitally or physically, discursive or nondiscursive, through a live performance, or otherwise (Klein, 2000). Ultimately, culture jamming maintains a characteristic of distortion because it is reliant upon an already established artifact. A message must already exist before it can readily be modified for new audiences.

Lastly, the organizational principle of the genre is awareness. Culture jamming forces a double-take effect in which viewers recognize a familiar sight but are then asked to interrogate its merits, rather than unquestionably consume its ideology. *Ella Watson* brings attention to racial disparities throughout the United States; *Read My Lips* raises AIDS awareness; *iRaq* is a vehement critique of consumerism; *The Right to Life* interrogates forced sterilization and reproductive rights; *Think disillusioned* questions the costs of globalization (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Amongst each of the analyzed culture jams, the genre qualities are highly evident. Culture jamming targets recognizable artifacts, distorts their intended messages, and generates an alternative awareness among audiences.

### ***Banksy at Disneyland***

Founded in the Bristol underground scene of the United Kingdom, Banksy's rapid rise in popularity is often attributed to their anonymity—no one exactly

knows Banksy's identity (Wyatt, 2006). The artist's initial style emphasized spray-painted, stenciled silhouettes showcasing politically and socially motivated critiques (James, 2010; see also Israel, 2014). More recent works include annually self-published collections and a 30-day-long residency and artistic installation in New York City, New York. In 2010, Banksy released a self-directed film entitled *Exit Through the Gift Shop*; the documentary tells the story of Thierry Guetta's rapid ascension into fame as graffitiist Mr. Brainwash (Banksy, 2010). Yet, halfway through *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, Banksy becomes a prominent plot point as the storyline focuses on the artist's 2006 show, *Barely Legal*. *Barely Legal* took place at a Los Angeles industrial warehouse attracting Hollywood celebrities where prints of the anonymous artist's work sold for \$500 each (Wyatt, 2006). Days before the exhibition, however, Banksy took advantage of their Southern Californian location and began creating a new piece of art to be exhibited at a U. S. landmark, Disneyland.

Footage, shot by Thierry, shows the artist departing an escalator, boarding a tram with patrons, and watching as the contents of his backpack are checked by security. Banksy narrates, "It was around the anniversary of September the eleventh, so, it was a pretty high-temper moment" (Banksy, 2010). After purchasing park tickets, the film shows the artist entering Disneyland. While walking the park, Banksy selects the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad to host their new work. The artist states, "So we've been wandering around the park for awhile and then there's this sign with a picture of a camera on it saying 'this would be a great place to take your souvenir photo.' So, that obviously seemed like the best place to put him" (Banksy, 2010). The camera pans to the artist seated on a bench. Banksy, dressed in blue jeans, a long-sleeve button-down shirt, sneakers, and a ball cap, inflates a mannequin for his new street art installment. Audio of Congo drums beat nervously over Thierry's video as Banksy steps through a waist-high, wooden fence. Wearing the backpack that once housed the mannequin, the artist carries the act-ready, inflatable Guantánamo detainee. Quickly, Banksy navigates through the restricted terrain that separates a designated walking path of the park and the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad. The artist slaloms between shoulder-high cacti for roughly 25 feet until they reach a tall iron fence. Banksy carefully raises the inflatable detainee over the pointed fence and positions it as the ride zooms past overhead. In the final shot, Banksy makes one last adjustment to the piece before grabbing his backpack and departing the scene. The camera zooms out and the sound of happily screaming patrons crescendo as Banksy departs the right side of the frame. Seconds after the artist exits the screen, the riders of the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad bellow past Banksy's new piece.

*Banksy at Disneyland* is incredibly powerful. Still, in order for the piece to be considered a culture jam, it must meet the genre qualifications. First, Banksy clearly targets a preexisting, representational artifact, the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad—which is one of many Disneyland artifacts. The British artist is motivated to install their piece at a location that promotes its scenic caliber. Endorsed by the park through the sign that encourages a photo opportunity, the



site is considered by Disneyland to be a critical location that positions itself as an embodiment of Disneyland. Banksy's installation at the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad successfully manipulates the original message of Disneyland consumerism by utilizing the ride as the culture jamming artifact. Banksy artistically hijacks this message in a successful culture jam, modifying the Disneyland attraction to create a resonating message of their own. As the piece utilizes a popular artifact, it fulfills the initial situational requirement.

Second, the artistic installment is indicative of distortion. Banksy's Guantánamo Bay detainee disrupts the experience of the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad by distorting the site's intended photographic experience. Unlike their notorious stencil graffiti, the artist utilized a 3-dimensional display to bolster the aggressiveness of the piece. Live audiences had the opportunity to take a memorable photograph in which the new installment could be captured from the scenic, "photo opportunity" location. The utilization of an easily visible 3-D art installation in opposition to graffiti emboldens the volume of resonance that viewing audiences receive. Additionally, the display of the inflatable detainee in an orange jumpsuit, wearing sensory deprivation gear, and in a kneeling position, successfully invokes public memory of the torture that detainees suffered at Guantánamo Bay. Through the art's placement, the original artifact of Big Thunder Mountain Railroad is readily altered for participating audiences. As such, *Banksy at Disneyland* meets the characteristic requirement of distortion.

Finally, Banksy's piece seeks to create awareness as viewers are exposed to a victim of the United States Federal Government. The audience experiences a shock; *Banksy at Disneyland* interrupts their pleasurable patronage and washes it in a reenactment of violence. Whereas the detention center at Guantánamo Bay is completely removed from public viewership, Banksy's piece jarringly weaves images of imprisonment directly into the Disneyland experience. Through the contrast of jovial consumerism with terrorists and torture, audiences are forced to consider the costs of their privilege that others endure. The artist's work employs the technique of culture jamming—a direct modification of the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad photo opportunity—to showcase the interplay between pleasure and punishment. An otherwise pleasing experience is stolen from the viewer, replacing the homogeneity of happiness with a clashing scene of insidious imprisonment; the hidden becomes the revealed at the ultimate point of pleasure. Just as Klein (2000) notes, these audiences do not have a choice in their viewership. *Banksy at Disneyland* is an aggressive hail to open consciences, demanding that viewers consider the implications of their identities, rather than consume in ignorance. As a result, a resonating message of awareness is conveyed to viewers as they consider the embodiment of a Guantánamo detainee, oblivious to their participation in consumerism. Through a message of awareness, the piece engages the substantive requirement.

Ultimately, *Banksy at Disneyland* alters the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, through an installation of street art, in order to create audience awareness. As a result, this piece successfully participates within the rhetorical genre of culture jamming.

*Banksy at Disneyland* seeks to contrast the concealed detainees of Guantánamo Bay with the consumerist culture of Disneyland. Through the juxtaposition of these concepts, the artist utilizes what Alinsky (1989) calls “mass political jujitsu” (p. 152); Banksy uses the renown of the park against itself. By installing their art within viewership of a scenic location at Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, the artist misdirects the message of Disneyland in order to yield a resonating one of their own creation—awareness. *Banksy at Disneyland* seeks to convey cognizance to the identities that we create through consumerism and more importantly, expose those whom we exile to the periphery of imprisonment. Moreover, the installment is highly visible and recorded. Audiences can experience the performance as often as they may like. As *Banksy at Disneyland* was recreated through its inclusion as a performance in *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, the live installment and the immortal recreation leaves a resonating message amongst audiences across time and space. Perhaps most importantly, Banksy’s installation, residing within the parameters of the park, positions this particular piece as incredibly unique. Their venue choices aren’t simply illegal, they are often highly provocative locations to create art (Israel, 2014). The installation of Banksy’s text within Disneyland, a space that relies on fiction and storytelling, creates new rhetorical implications for culture jamming.

Disneyland exists as a hyperreality—a space in which the atmosphere and settings are so fantastically real that audiences are persuaded to accept them as reality. Umberto Eco (1996) posits that the park exists as a space so incredibly perfected that its experience blurs and can even surpass the pleasures of reality. Disneyland is a unique space that promotes technology as being able to offer more reality to audiences than nature ever could. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard (1994) notes how this particular hyperreality serves as a space capable of erasing conceptions of the real world. Baudrillard writes,

Everywhere today one must recycle waste, and the dreams, the phantasms, the historical, fairylike, legendary imaginary of children and adults is a waste product, the first great toxic excrement of a hyperreal civilization. On a mental level, Disneyland is the prototype of this new function” (p. 13).

In a place that proudly proclaims a hegemonic narrative of consumerism, *Banksy at Disneyland* successfully asks audiences to interrogate that experience. Although the park is frequently used as an escape from the real world, Banksy’s culture jam thrusts the grit of reality into an unsuspecting private space. Not only does *Banksy at Disneyland* challenge the vulnerabilities of a hyperreality, it successfully provokes audience awareness. As park visitors clamored to view the installation, Disneyland responded by stopping the Big Thunder Mountain Railroad until the art was removed, effectively shutting down a part of the park (James, 2010). Although patrons chose to actively participate in a hyperreality, *Banksy at Disneyland* served to remind them of the inescapable status quo—as you’re enjoying this space, persons are suffering elsewhere. Banksy’s text serves as a reminder to audiences that no space, not even a hyperreality, is safe from the reach of culture jamming.

## Conclusion

Culture jamming is an avenue of communication used by those encouraging awareness and resistance. Through the distortion of a widely known artifact, activists create a moment of critical awareness. This study offers communication theory a grounded conceptualization of the culture jamming genre. Moreover, *Banksy at Disneyland* is understood to successfully participate within the genre of culture jam, engendering new implications for rhetorical theory. Utilizing a distortion of Big Thunder Mountain Railroad, with the installment of a Guantánamo Bay detainee, the artist generated a message of awareness amongst audiences. Rather than experience the hegemonic narrative of a hyperreality, audiences are forcefully reminded of the costs that others endure for their privilege. What future graffiti, performance, and street art by Banksy will come to fruition is unknown. Until then, spectators can view *Banksy at Disneyland* at their leisure, offering audiences an immortal installment of culture jamming.

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