

Tactical Media and Hyper-Surveillance:  
Chair: Prof. Nick Dyer-Witheford

### **Beyond “Public Sphere”: Towards a Critical Understanding of the Socio-technological Dimensions of Resistance**

**- Nicole M. Lindsay (School of Communication, Simon Fraser University) and Adam P. Molnar (Department of Sociology & Cultural, Social and Political Thought (CSPT), University of Victoria)**

The democratic deficits of mainstream corporate media have been thoroughly documented and theorized by a wide range of media scholars and activists. With the continued consolidation of media power and erosion of public broadcast funding in Canada, negative trends show no signs of abating.

This paper takes as its starting point the need to give greater theoretical attention to emerging structural and agential properties of media politics in light of recent socio-technological changes. A more nuanced understanding of the implications of the mediation of social relations is particularly crucial in a commercialized media environment which limits democratic access to technologies and channels of public communication.

We take up the argument that reliance on the concept of the “public sphere” as existing within broader media, economic and political structures has limited the extent to which we can develop a deeper understanding of new media spaces. Rather, moving beyond a debate that merely seeks to re-theorize the public sphere might allow us to better account for the complexities and obstacles encountered in attempts to articulate coherent resistance across the terrain of a hyper-mediated, fragmented social space.

We argue that a more beneficial praxis-oriented approach would be to examine configurations of power and subjectivity in order to begin interrogating the role of alternative media in relation to visibility, representation and sustaining oppositional culture.

On this theoretical basis, we explore the limitations and opportunities presented by video activism and documentary film as one set of tactics within a wider strategy of critical media praxis. Our discussion of documentary activism highlights possibilities for coherent articulations between social movements that might counter the cultural fragmentation of the social and contribute to struggles for a transformative democratic politics.

### **The Ghost in the Machine: From CB Scanner to Wiki-Surveillance**

**- Mike Arntfield (Faculty of Information & Media Studies, University of Western Ontario)**

This article presents an interrogation of the variables, both historical and theoretical, encompassing the rise of what I call wiki-surveillance. This includes the publicly accessible and open source nature of new media hardware and software that fosters the unregulated recording of and reporting on images by civilians. With

surveillance technologies normally endemic to the state having been co-opted by the rubrics of late capitalism, I address how contemporary media phenomena such as cell phone cameras, video iPods, Youtube uploads and downloads, and the present Facebook furor are in fact grounded in an epistemology of resistance that began with citizen band (CB) radio in the 1970s, and arguably even earlier with the counterfeiting of keys to access police sentry boxes in early 20<sup>th</sup> century America. While in these earlier cases, engineering an underground and rhizomatic network of civilian-lead counter-intelligence and resisting the state's control of information and history by accessing a restricted cultural discourse was the primary objective, our current vector of computer mediated resistance is more diffuse in both tactical and ideological terms. Looking at emerging cultural trends through a structuralist lens, I address how the present architecture of wiki-surveillance—the golden age of voyeurism—is potentially counter-productive in terms of resistance, in that rather than turning the tools of surveillance back upon the surveyor as in the case of CB radio, what Jacques Ellul calls the “technical state apparatus” has actually been suborned rather subverted by virtue of people being placated through the apparent celebrity of both watching and being watched. As such, we must question whether the commercialization of law enforcement and an acquiescence to the end of privacy have both provided the template for a new police state, and whether wiki-surveillance represents a movement whose participants are in effect the new Vichy of the post-industrial paradigm, rather than its antagonists.

## **Irony, Parody and the Politics of Contemporary Satire**

**- Ian Reilly (School of English and Theatre Studies, University of Guelph)**

“A tactic,” writes Michael E. Gardiner (2000) in *Critiques of Everyday Life*, “depends on time – it is always on the watch for opportunities that may be seized ‘on the wing’. Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities’ (173). For Gardiner, tactics are part of a broader system of resistance strategies that lead to moments, or “opportunities,” to produce and disseminate counter-narratives. Tactical resistance movements, however, are always-already in the process of making small gains. Significant changes within the broader socio-political sphere are marginal at best and create moments of critical awareness that are, by and large, fleeting, if ephemeral. Having said that, one might also argue that with the rise of tactical media, new media practitioners are enjoying a period of considerable success. Culture jammers continue to challenge dominant assumptions about the corporate world and environmental policy; web parodists like The Yes Men through their project of identity theft and identity correction, have encouraged other practitioners to challenge the authority of otherwise untouchable corporations and firms through web/digital dissent; lastly, political satirists like Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart and the writers at *The Onion* use parody, irony, and satirical commentary to force readerships and audiences to reflect on the state of contemporary politics and the mainstream media. Together, these figures represent but a small fraction of the incredible variety of tactical strategies and dissenting voices being proliferated across North America.

My paper will address how irony and parody serve as important tools in the communication of dissenting opinion across different media. Because ironic and parodic utterances travel well across media, I will examine how these tools create opportunities for satirists to proliferate a wide range of critical commentary in a media environment that is saturated by a steady flow of questionable information and news. Irony and parody as tactic, I will argue, provides an important vehicle for critical commentary but also incites, in the words of Pippa Norris, a “virtuous circle” of communication that encourages other consumers and practitioners of satire to create their own counter-narratives. What emerges, then, is a culture in which critical dialogue is not only enhanced but also encouraged by irony and parody. As communication strategies, parody and irony are quickly becoming a central part of our meaning-making strategies in an age when deviating from and/or challenging the internal logic of the dominant culture is a risky enterprise. My paper will draw from *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and *The Onion* as important sites of resistance that employ irony and parody to communicate dissenting opinion.

### **Becoming Machinic Virtuosos: Guitar Hero, Rez, and Multitudinous Aesthetics**

**- Henry Svec (Faculty of Information & Media Studies, University of Western Ontario)**

Media scholars Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greg de Peuter view digital play as a complex, conflicted site on the terrain of global capital; although seemingly “one-dimensional” diversions in many cases, video games also constitute a space where the virtual can be actualized and where radical subjectivities can be collaboratively improvised (2005; forthcoming). Drawing from Dyer-Witheford’s and de Peuter’s work, my paper explores a gaming trend that has not yet been critically examined – the incorporation by recent titles of musical performance. The wildly popular *Guitar Hero* and the lesser known but critically acclaimed *Rez* serve as examples of digital-musical play; my paper argues that both games offer virtual “lines of flight,” however humble.

But in order to critically analyze these ludic-aesthetic works, I first attempt to synthesize and develop what I call “machinic virtuosity.” According to autonomist Marxist theorists Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the virtuoso (or “immaterial labourer”) is the paradigmatic worker of late capitalism (or “Empire”). As these thinkers argue, the qualitative shift to Empire’s mode of production is the moment when, theoretically, work becomes political. And yet, capital’s axiomatic of exchange remains as a sort of postmodern disciplinarian of virtuosity. A “machinic” virtuoso, then, to borrow a term from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, might be one that aesthetically subverts or “de-territorializes” Empire’s capture of human creativity.

With “machinic virtuosity” in mind I proceed to explicate *Guitar Hero* and *Rez*, two video games that explicitly engage with immaterial labour and performance under Empire. Guattari has pondered the possible sources of subversive art in late capitalism: “[Virtual machines] are not easily found at the usual marketplace for subjectivity and maybe even less at that for art; yet they haunt everything concerned with creation, the desire for becoming-other” (Chaosmosis 92). Can Guattari’s “virtual machines” be found at Wal-Mart? As I will show, they can.