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The power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. ... To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies—all this is indispensably necessary. Even in using the word doublethink it is necessary to exercise doublethink. For by using the word one admits that one is tampering with reality; by a fresh act of doublethink one erases this knowledge; and so on indefinitely, with the lie always one leap ahead of the truth.

—George Orwell, *1984*[1]

I will speak to you in plain, simple English. And that brings us to tonight's word: 'truthiness.' Now I'm sure some of the 'word police,' the 'wordinistas' over at Webster's are gonna say, 'hey, that's not really a word.' Well, anyone who knows me knows I'm no fan of dictionaries or reference books. I don't trust books. They're all fact, no heart. And that's exactly what's pulling our country apart today. 'Cause face it, folks; we are a divided nation. Not between Democrats and Republicans, or conservatives and liberals, or tops and bottoms. No, we are divided between those who think with their head, and those who know with their heart.

—Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*[2]

At first they appeared to be innocent Lite Brite kits assembled by mischievous teens. Placed in various locations across the greater Boston area as a guerrilla marketing campaign for the adult cartoon show *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, it's hard to conceive that these simple magnetic devices with batteries, duct tape, and LEDs would launch a hysterical terrorisms scare by city authorities. Summing up the gulf of reaction between the establishment and the pop culture public, on the YouTube page featuring a video of the guerrilla marketers in action, one observer in the comments area stated, "Just to clue you in: Bombs are traditionally not covered in

LEDs which trace out the shape of a cartoon moon person giving you the middle finger. Generally, as terrorists don't want their bomb plots foiled, they tend not to decorate their bombs in bright lights advertising their presence and then leave them lying around for weeks."[3]

Yes, in retrospect the overreaction by Boston authorities does seem severe. But they are to be forgiven, somewhat, for being baffled by the cultural lexicon trafficked by marketers. In the ensuing days of the event, even pundits were having a difficult time labeling the action, ranging in superlatives such as "a terrorist hoax," "prank," "viral campaign," "publicity stunt," "marketing stunt," "ad lights," and "'non-terrorist' embarrassment in Boston" (Weaver, 2007, paragraph 11). Not surprisingly, the operation resulted in the Cartoon Network chief's resignation, but despite the fall-out (not the radioactive kind) the show still managed a ratings spike. In the end, it's the parent company, Turner Broadcasting, a subsidiary of Time Warner Inc., who profited the most. It was probably well worth the $2 million they paid to Boston for the trouble. To paraphrase an ancient Chinese curse, "May you live in confusing times."

In an era when fake news is real news and real news is fake, it's getting more difficult to discern what is commentary, propaganda, or a sales pitch. Even our random conversations threaten to be infected with the viral advertising practice of peer-to-peer marketing. This is what happens when a culture smuggles persuasion techniques in "postirony," the simulacra of irony in which phrases are merely signs of sardonic currency, but are vacated of any political or critical content. Postirony is the embrace of contradictory ideologies as normal, acceptable, and desirable. It's kitsch cognitive dissonance. It's a wink to political consciousness while simultaneously discarding it. It's Neil Postman's idea that we are entertaining ourselves to death, but with the clipped smile of a Republican used car salesmen who just completed Newt Gingrich's seminar on How to Become a Bolshevik Operative in the American Political System. It's Gen X cynicism gone horribly astray. It's the droll, expressionless face of Bill Murray in *Lost in Translation* and *Broken Flowers*, and is so deeply imbedded into the vernacular of advanced technological societies, few are conscious of it.

Examples abound, such as war critics viewing a highly disparaging parody like *Team America* as an indictment of the War on Terror, while wingnut warmongers simultaneously embrace it as a symbol of patriotism. Or Mars, Inc., can launch a Snickers viral Web campaign whose hip hop protagonists battle an evil record company selling out African American youth, but in reality the parent company allegedly engages in exploitative child labor practices in Africa to produce its candy. And then there are the misogynistic BudLight ads that discretely promote alcoholic behavior while telling us to "drink responsibly." None of this is surprising given that marketers and their "marks" inhabit a violent, repressive world empire that is also supposed to be a democracy. Talk about doublethink. In the Age of Postirony, war *is* peace because who cares about constitutionally challenged militarism or a

mediated political system as long as at the end of the day the numbers on the stock exchange board still climb.

All this is exacerbated by the business of doing business. That is, we live in a commodities system with a media traditionally driven by advertising. The problem is that models are changing, and so too are consumers, especially one of the most coveted demographics: teens. Take, for example, the following description for a marketing industry conference attempting to unlock the mysteries of the teen market, called "What Teens Want":

> Teens are wired different than any another consumer group. They navigate through media clutter with a heightened "BS" meter to sniff out hidden advertising agendas. In a post-scarcity media world, there is no shortage of brands or media pipeline channels. Attention is the new scarcity. Loyalty, trust and affinity become the new pipeline. When there is so much choice, what is the new role of earned attention?[4]

The curious word here is "attention," because as we'll see, it was the problem of attention in the first place that created a cultural climate in which "cool" became the flattened emotion of knowledge work, with "postirony" as its current lexicon. Given that irony has been a potent tool of social criticism, it remains to be seen if such a strategy can still work. By using Sasha Cohen's Borat character as a case study, we'll examine how irony may still be possible in an age of postironic deconstruction.

Doublethink Trouble, Doublemint Gum

It may be useful to think of postirony as the postmodern equivalent of George Orwell's (1990 [1949]) "doublethink." Consider the following passage from *1984*,

> His mind slid away into the labyrinthine world of doublethink. To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully-constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy; to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again: and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself. That was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the art of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word 'doublethink' involved using doublethink. (p. 35)

Now compare this passage with the following from Alex Shakar's (2002) novel, *The Savage Girl*,

> …Our culture has become so saturated with ironic doubt that it's beginning to doubt its own mode of doubting. If everything is false, then by the same token anything can be taken as true, or at least as true enough. Truths are no longer

> absolute; they're shifting, temporary, whatever serves the purpose of the moment. Postironists create their own sets of serviceable realities and live in them independent of any facets of the outside world that they choose to ignore…. Practitioners of postironic consciousness blur the boundaries between irony and earnestness in ways we traditional ironists can barely understand, creating a state of consciousness wherein critical and uncritical responses are indistinguishable. Postirony seeks not to demystify but to befuddle, not to synthesize opposites but to suspend them, keeping open all possibilities at once. And we marketers, in forging a viable mode of postironic consumerism, must seek to foster in the consumer a mystical relationship with consumption. Through consumption consumers will be gods; outside of consumption they will be nothing: a perpetual oscillation between absolute control and absolute vulnerability, between grandeur and persecution. (p. 140)

Postirony is a strategy to deal with cognitive dissonance, a condition when one simultaneously possesses contradictory beliefs that result in mental noise. Like doublethink, postirony is a defense *and* a control strategy, but unlike in *1984*, I don't believe postirony was consciously constructed as a master strategy for mind control, but evolved as a result of an emotional tactic for the workplace to become a market language.

Irony can still be one of the primary forms of mental resistance against doublethink because it is through an ironic disposition one can distance herself from the ambient realm of misinformation and marketing. This underlies my weak theory of why dark humor is prevalent in Great Britain. I believe the one way a population can cope with becoming a decrepit and dying world military power is through sardonic humor. Monty Python is the best anecdote for imperial impotence, or the cross-dressing comic Eddie Izzard. As Shakespeare demonstrated repeatedly, the court jester was the only person permitted to speak truth to power without getting his head chopped off. Sadly, modern societies don't employ tricksters in high office, but our corporate media abound with them. Consider John Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and now Cohen, a Brit. In modern parlance, they speak "truthiness to power."

Within postirony there is a space where interventions can disrupt internal paradoxes to form a kind of empowering dialectic. Comedian Colbert's term "truthiness," for example, has entered the zeitgeist because it so precisely mirrors the contradictory situation of infotainment as news we're dealing with. It's an update of the newspeak term "bellyfeel," which describes an intuitive belief that belies logic, but truthiness, because it is satire and thereby politically safe, pierces the liminal zone of noisy dissonance to clarify the manner in which news is now packaged in mainstream media, tricky business, to be sure.

Such strategies are difficult to contrive. Look no further than Fox News' "irony deficient" rightwing counterpunch, *The 1/2 Hour News Hour,* which fails to muster even a snort with its canned laughter and inability to maneuver postirony, because, unlike media critics, they are the party-member analog of *1984* who are so enmeshed

with doublethink, they can't navigate its treacherous realm with authenticity. As the blogger Plaid Adder notes,

> Irony has been defined many different ways, but the definition I think works best here is that irony is what we see when we contemplate the gap between what appears to be and what is, and/or the gap between what is and what ought to be. The main project of *The Daily Show* is to satirize the media; and because the media are responsible for creating perception, and because the perception created by the media has lately become massively and outrageously divergent from anything one might call reality, and because reality right now just sucks so hard, every aspect of *The Daily Show* is about irony.[5]

The 1/2 Hour News Hour is trying a complex ninja move when trying to parody the parody, and fails because, as Addeler explains, the key to successful humor is in deriding authority, not underdogs:

> Mocking the powerful has the positive effect of reminding everyone that though these figures may be powerful, they are not superhuman, and can be resisted/outwitted/defied; it also has the therapeutic effect of validating the anger and pain we feel as we suffer for these people, and reminding us that in fact, it's not us, it's them. Mocking the vulnerable is just bullying, and all it does is pander to the audience's worst instincts. Right-wing pundits in the main either don't understand this rule, or have a seriously warped understanding of who's vulnerable and who's powerful. Take, for instance, Rush Limbaugh's hilarious impression of Michael J. Fox on Parkinson's medication. What made him think that was funny? Did it remind him of when he was a boy and they all used to band together on the playground to torment the kid with cerebral palsy? Or in his mind, is Michael J. Fox a servant of some vast international conspiracy of Parkinson's sufferers out to destroy all that is good in the world?[6]

Still, the lack of an effective ironic approach from conservatives seems odd considering that rightwing humor can be some of the most biting, as in the T-shirt with the phrase, "This shirt brought to you by capitalism," accompanying a photo of Che. The key point is that for irony to work, it has to reveal some kind of innate truth, such as bullying by authorities, or hypocrisy. Without a moral compass, it is just another stream of humorless "weasel words" recycled from the PR industry.

Irony is also a finicky tool because you run the risk of going over people's heads or outright offending them. Remember Lenny Bruce? In the epoch of National Security Agency keyword filters trying to ferret out terrorists on the Web, or humorless Homeland Security officials assembling watch lists, words are powerful markers of patriotic infidelity, but taken out of context, black—or sardonic—humor can be totally misunderstood. Ironically (!), this could even have an adverse effect on the most pro-war of our society. Take, for instance, the Green Beret motto, "Kill 'em all, let God sort 'em out." If you were a computer program, how would you interpret the motives of the phrase's authors?

It takes a deft trickster to deploy irony as a critical weapon when as a cultural

rhetorical practice it has become so commonplace it fails to rise above the din of absurdity. So it remains to be seen if Jewish comic Cohen's anti-Semitic Borat, the bumbling pumpkin who must navigate his way through the treacherous landmines of New York snobbery and Middle American prejudice, is a combatant in the global psych warfare of postironic marketing, or is just an ingenious clown exploiting weaknesses in the moral character of flawed people. After all, Cohen is just a comic, right? A few things clue us in that Borat may indeed be an insurgent. The Borat character is a TV reporter, i.e., a member of the media, and is also a refugee of modernity's forgotten realm. That is, his character is not a child of the Internet, but rather of the Second World, which was obliterated by the termination of the Cold War. In pre-9/11 literature on media activism, 1989 is considered a watershed because it is at that moment "modernity" finally collapsed (represented by the end of the battle between world behemoths, U. S. and USSR). It's when we "officially" enter the age of neo-liberal globalization. But multiple "modernities" still exist. Not everyone is wired into the techno-realm of the U. S. and Europe, and it is from this perspective that Borat seeks to be a tour guide (with a 1917 map of the U. S., no less!). In doing so, he is an insurrectionary caricature who becomes an agent of the transition from an isolated power grid to global nomadism. He's training us how to be productive citizens, and hence modernized workers, in the global economy. But before we probe deeper into his methods, we are still like proverbial fish that do not know the sea; we must explore this illusorily territory of marketing cool as if it were the foreign land that Borat reports from. How as cultural reporters would we map the territory?

Psychological Warfare—Infowars—Ontological Warfare

For McLuhan, media content was like the meat thrown to the guard dogs. It's just a way to divert attention from the actual changes that media forms have been making on our perception. So beyond the mirror shades of cool are more insidious conclusions made by German media theorists and French philosopher Paul Virillio. As reported by Geert Lovink (2003), there is a school of thought that underlying all media strategies is militarism. "Media from now on are merely spin-off products of the military that basically deal with the war of perception. The rest is merely noise" (p. 26). Not surprisingly, the flipside is that the "trauma" of the Second World War produced modern media criticism. "War is the father of all media, and the founding fathers of media theory are Heidegger and Benjamin (McLuhan being a good third)" (p. 27). Disinformation and war are the key to our historical moment because it is the propaganda environment that sets the tone of our social and economic system. The concern is that underlying all our decisions is a deeply embedded consumerism at the service of a war economy, and militarism shoring up and expanding the "free" market:

The Big Digital Bang is threatening to crush (or "liberate") all meaning, to keep every cry against injustice out of the broadcasting range. That's at least the fear of a group—perhaps a diminishing group—for whom "media" means more than just a job processing other people's data. But through this data smog and processing fog, the lessons of the Cold War were learned and universalized: through this haze of the "media" we see the vague outlines and traces of invisible psychological warfare, without clear fronts and with a low-intensity paranoid conflicts on the horizons. Infowar precludes the friend-enemy distinction, which according to Carl Schmitt, forms the basis of politics. (Lovink, 2003, p. 307)

In CIA parlance, propaganda campaigns are "playing the Grand Wurlitzer," i.e., keying all the right notes to generate a grand campaign of information that is more akin to noise than music. Curiously, there is something a bit old school (and dare we say *Borat*-ish?) about the image of a Wurlitzer organ. What comes to mind are silent movies (in which directed visuals merely require a soundtrack), skating rinks (in which we as citizens are to mindlessly lap in circles), churches (again an environment where our behaviors are orchestrated), or funerals (no comment necessary). So why noise? There are two kinds of propaganda: black and gray. Black propaganda is an outright lie, as in, "Saddam Hussein is responsible for 9-11." Gray propaganda is a lie that contains an element of truth to make it more believable, such as, "there are weapons of mass destruction in Iraq." Granted the reality quotient here is minuscule, but because there was a history of WMDs in the past, its potentiality makes the idea feasible. The philosopher Robert Anton Wilson was fond of saying that 25% of political information is true; we just don't know which part. What makes gray propaganda effective is that it distorts and confuses issues, and also puts people on the defensive. Think of the "Swift boating" of John Kerry's presidential campaign. It muddled and distorted key elements of Kerry's character, making it a distraction that ultimately hurt his image and detracted from the discussion of issues. If you compare this with CIA led-operations in Third World countries over the past 50 years, you'd see similar tactics used to discredit politicians who were out of favor with Washington's policy goals.

Borat toys with America's unconscious militarism when he performs at the Salem rodeo. To great cheers he amps up the cruelty of war: "We support your war of terror… May 'Supreme Warlord' George W. Bush drink the blood of every single man, woman, and child of Iraq… May you destroy their country so that for the next thousand years, not even a single lizard will survive in their desert!" At first the crowd cheers, but as the statements get bloodier, they are increasingly confused. Did he really say *that*? Is that what we really think?

Fugitive Poseurs: Origins of Postirony

Native American writer Gerald Visner postulates that Indians compartmentalize an internalized caricature of themselves, which manifests as a "fugitive pose." Treated as internal enemies in their own lands, Native Americans have had to develop

mental strategies to combat spiritual and psychic colonization through a defensive posture that is unemotional and distant. Indigenous people are typically the first to bear the brunt of "enclosure," the systematic practice of capitalist restructuring that in essence smashes land-based cultures like bags of dry clay, then remolds them into the system of commodities. It's not just a matter of turning people into workers, but it's restructuring their spatiotemporal reality. With enclosure comes "the loss of traditional culture bearings: the emergence of a sense anomie associated with the loss of a stable and cyclical cultural life" (Andrejevic, p. 30).

This gives pause to the concept of "early adapters," which is usually reserved for those heroic individuals of the capitalist avant-garde that innovate new technology, invent edgy software or develop new styles. The real early adapters are those who have figured out how to maneuver around mind control and colonization of their souls that results from the embedding of capitalist ideology into the entire thought universe of a society. In the case of Native culture, humor is one of many strategies. In the Native American written and directed movie, *Smoke Signals*, there's a humorous scene that plays with the fugitive pose:

> Victor Joseph: You gotta look mean or people won't respect you. White people will run all over you if you don't look mean. You gotta look like a warrior! You gotta look like you just came back from killing a buffalo!

> Thomas Builds-the-Fire: But our tribe never hunted buffalo—we were fishermen.

> Victor Joseph: What! You want to look like you just came back from catching a fish? This ain't "Dances With Salmon" you know!

If the fugitive pose evolved out of a historical situation in which Native Americans were systematically relocated from their tribal lands and assimilated into the thought system of the colonizers through boarding schools ("Kill the Indian, save the man" was the educational slogan of the day), it should be noted that in the late 1800s there was a popular genre of "abduction" literature in which White female colonists were kidnapped by "savages." After entering an alien world, they return altered. Vizner notes that there is some similarity between these stories and modern alien abduction myths. The connection I see relates to the ambient environment of the new technological society that produced both of these "hysterias"; these stories exist in an environment in which there is a prevailing sense of dislocation resulting from new technology. Since the invention of electricity and the telegraph, traditional notions of place and self have been radically disrupted. In both cases—abduction literature of the 1800s and that of the aliens at the end of the 20th Century—according to common literary tropes the most "innocent" of our society, women, were being forced through alien sexuality to reproduce hybrids. It is my contention that there is a deep cultural anxiety about the radical shift in perception brought about by mechanical reproduction (a sexual metaphor, if you think about it). As cybernetic hybrids, we, too, require a fugitive pose.[7]

Consequently, there are a few things worth noting about the "turn" that media technology brought about in the 19th Century. One is the sense that recording technology, as media scholar Mary Ann Doane (2002) has noted, became a means to contain catastrophe and time.

> The rationalization of time characterizing industrialization and the expansion of capitalism was accompanied by a structuring of contingency and temporality through emerging technologies of representation—a structuring that attempted to ensure their residence outside structure, to make tolerable an incessant rationalization. Such a strategy is not designed simply to deal with the leakage or by-product of rationalization; it is structurally necessary to the ideologies of capitalist modernization. (p. 11)

The second is what media archeologist Jonathan Crary (2001) interprets is the double bind of perception. This, he says, results from conflicting modes of mental engagement originally required of industrial work's tight focus and the multisensory shock created by exploding urban environments and new media. This is at the root of our contemporary predominance, if not false, diagnosis of ADD:

> In a culture that is so relentlessly founded on a short attention span, on the logic of the nonsequitur, on perceptual overload, on the generalized ethic of 'getting ahead,' and on the celebration of aggressiveness, it is nonsensical to pathologize these forms of behavior or look for the causes of this imaginary disorder in neurochemistry, brain anatomy, and genetic predisposition… [T]he behavior categorized as ADD is merely one of many manifestations resulting from this cultural double bind, from the contradictory modes of performance and cognition that are continually demanded or incited. (p. 36-7)

He further laments the "the sweeping use of potent neurochemicals as a strategy of behavior management" (p. 37).

Perhaps "fugitive" maybe too strong a word, because fugitive implies a self-knowing subject engaged in an act of exile, a conscious running from the system. It may be more accurate to describe the modern cyborg as a "fugue," someone who wonders in a narcoleptic state. This is closer to the dangers of the increasingly over stimulated media environment warned of by McLuhan. In his re-working of the Narcissus myth, rather than being enraptured by our reflection, McLuhan (2002) says that just as media technology expand our senses, we extend ourselves into our mediated reflection. In the process we "autoamputate"—we numb the parts of ourselves that get over-stimulated, yet we stimulate ourselves further just so we can feel something. Like screeching guitar feedback gone awry, the result is getting trapped within an iterating loop:

> The Greek myth of Narcissus is directly concerned with a fact of human experience, as the word *Narcissus* indicates. It is from the Greek word *narcosis*, or numbness. The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the

servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system…. Now the point of this myth is the fact that men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves. There have been cynics who insisted that men fall deepest in love with women who give them back their own image. Be that as it may, the wisdom of the Narcissus myth does not convey any idea that Narcissus fell in love with anything he regarded as himself. Obviously he would have had very different feelings about the image had he known it was an extension or repetition of himself. It is, perhaps, indicative of the bias of our intensely technological and, therefore, narcotic culture that we have long interpreted the Narcissus story to mean that he fell in love with himself, that he imagined the reflection to be Narcissus! (pp. 41-2)

I take this as a valid explanation for why films and television are increasingly more violent and more sexual while incorporating faster edits, and are developing more complex plotlines. I predict that future films will be five minutes at the most; anything longer will just be too slow for our over-stimulated, multitasking society (YouTube and the "media snacker" mentality has almost brought us there alrady).

Not surprisingly, artists surfing the edges of these societal shifts at the end of the 19th Century began to change their practices from representing external objects to describing psychological states. Consequently, by WWI two significant cultural developments manifested in the fine arts. First, mass media became the subject of paintings with the literal incorporation of newspaper headlines (The Futurists), or by the physical collaging of newsprint (Picasso). Secondly, Dada and Surrealism emerged to create an absurdist dialectic with mass culture. Satire became the primary rhetorical tools for commenting on the contradictions of modernity, especially in light of the carnage produced by the First World War, but also from the dehumanizing and mind-numbing impact of industrialization. Additionally, thinkers like Freud and Jung popularized the idea of dreams and unconsciousness, enabling artists to incorporate the new vocabulary of juxtaposition as a tool for social criticism. The quintessential example is Magritte's "Treachery of Images" featuring the infamous pipe with the inscribed French phrase, "This is not a pipe." Magritte was commenting on our propensity to mistake reproductions with the things themselves. This is a byproduct of how mechanically reproduced arts create another double bind of having to simultaneously embrace an image as a thing, and its dual condition of the thing represented. That artists would now be questioning the fundamental principles of language—visual and print—indicates a growing unease with the instability of meaning of normal discourse.

Not only does irony emerge in Surrealism as a way to cope with having to contain different modes of perception simultaneously, double binds requiring complex mental acrobatics become currency in the emergence of American cool, especially in the dialog of film noire and later with the guise of post-WWII aviator glasses reflecting the world back at us. Alan Liu (2004) argues that "cool" is how

culture deals with the flattening of emotion required of a Taylorized workforce. The "Fordization of the face" symbolized the emotionless assembly line worker who could be fired for smiling. The smoothing and management of worker emotions was further codified as we transformed from an industrial economy to one based on knowledge work, and the invention of a white-collar middle class. "For better or for worse, a good firm has one structure of feeling" (Liu, p. 125).

Liu further explains that cultural "cool" became a way of enclosing (or displacing, really) dissent, and creating a feedback system, muck like the one described by McLuhan, in which cool could be a perpetual motion machine that serves as a kind of emotional restraint system.

> The contradiction in looking to high-tech consumer culture for refuge from the knowledge work that produces such culture is not lost on the cool themselves. Their response to the contradiction—at once their fiercest, most genuine critique to date and the symptom of a profound defeat—is irony, our great contemporary 'Fordization of the face'… Even when knowledge workers have graduated and gone to work, 'cool' is how they instantly retreat to their mental 'room' instead of joining the broader, public history of peoples resistant to rationalization. (p. 305)

I Saw the Best Minds of My Generation
Starving Hysterical Sardonic at the Postirony of Dawn

Still, traversing the margins of this space of cool were the subcultures that acted as capitalist escape valves. Fluxus, Yippies, Situationists, and punks all deployed irony, hoaxing, and pranking as tools for social criticism and activism. As the progenitor of Gen X, punk brought irony to its critical apex and then wiped it out. I should know, because I was there. Having grown up in the post-1960s hangover of Los Angeles, many of my generational ilk graduated from the pop psychology of the 1970s to a haze of nuclear holocaust dreams and Ronald Reagan. Like many of my peers, we started out as skaters navigating the concrete ruins of suburbia and then matriculated to the slam-a-thons of hardcore punk. In Los Angeles (and elsewhere in the technological world), punk's primary aesthetic was appropriation and irony. We stole from every avant-garde movement known in the 20th Century and regurgitated them with a very dark strain of humor. Consider the names of artist and bands of the era: Dead Kennedys, Jello Biafra, Diana Cancer, etc. We utterly believed that hippies had failed to make the revolution and we were left with the tattered shreds of ineffective social protest and ecological apocalypse. In retrospect, this was a skewed view, but this is how things seemed in 1980.

Unfortunately, as a social movement punk failed as well. For one it substituted one dysfunctional family for another. Drugs, alcohol, and violence were constant reminders of our psychological frailty. But more importantly, our logic was nihilistic. The movement was so cynical it could cease to believe anything anymore. Sadly, this may have become one of our cultural legacies: the one thing that got adapted

by the culture of marketing was punk's postmodern pastiche aesthetic, and cynical irony. But it's one thing to use irony as tool for social critique and sensibility, and another as an advertising technique. Like French cheese, irony remains authentic and alive as long as you don't refrigerate it.

Authenticity in the Mirror World Colonies

Generally when I encounter any official statements made by government officials, I assume that the opposite is true. In some ways we live in a mirror world. When you stare at your reflection, left is right, and right is left. Trouble is, we often mistake the reflection for reality. This is what Socrates decried when he said any wizard could perform the simple trick of imitating the world: just hold up a mirror. The ancient Aztecs of Mexico understood this. Tezcatlipoca, AKA Smoking Mirror, was a god of war, illusions, and the dark arts, and was primarily accessed through obsidian mirrors. In an interesting historical twist, the precursor to film, phantasmagoria, were 19th Century performances created with a mix of smoke and mirror. Reflections and refractions, especially when you point mirrors at each other, can trick perception, something we call in less polite circles, mind fucking. Unfortunately there is no better phrase to describe the mediated reality we maneuver on a daily basis.

Having grown up in the border region of the Southwestern United States, I have been interacting with border culture my entire life. Over the past years I've seen an interesting transition take place in which a population that traditionally has strong resistant strains in its mental make-up to be immune to "mind fucking," is trying desperately to avoid the brainwashing that has so thoroughly pervaded its northern neighbors. One of the strategies is an aesthetic practice called *rasquachismo*. Roughly translated as "kitch appropriation," it's a folk art practice that reconfigures invasive pop culture. Imagine Bart Simpson with a poncho, the Starbucks label with Poncho Villa instead of a mermaid, or the Nintendo logo becoming "No Intiendo" ("I don't understand"). The U. S. and Canadian analog would be culture jamming. For *rasquachismo* wit is paramount: it's that ability to laugh at our folly to make it bearable. This was the insight that makes *Stranger in a Strange Land's* (1991) hybrid alien-human protagonist learn to laugh: the tragedy of others is ultimately what makes us giggle. Michael the Martian-human says after an epiphany, people "laugh because it hurts... because it's the only thing that'll make it stop hurting... The goodness is in the laughing. I grok it is a bravery...and a sharing...against pain and sorrow and defeat" (p. 387-8).

For Mexicans, humor is a matter of survival. Being cultural hybrids themselves, Mexicans are dealing with dual modes of consciousness from their European and indigenous ancestors. As they are being integrated into the global marketplace, now they are contending with NAFTA, Wal-Mart, and Taco Bell. As one worker building the first McDonalds in the northern Mexican state of Zacatecas says of his El Norte-loving brother,

Every head is a world… There's the head of McDonald, the head of Soriana, and the head of Jaramillo over here; the head of the guy who invented cars, the guy who invented airplanes, and the guy who invented televisions. No one is the same. No one does the same thing in the same way. [But now] the whole world is coming out of one head, and from that head you're getting everything. It's happening all over Mexico with these stores like Wal-Mart and McDonald's, stores that came out of the head of allá [there]. Down here, in Mexico, that head is developing all its thoughts. (Silverstein, 2005)

By taking the codes of corporate invaders and mixing them with ironic juxtapositions, Mexicans maintain a critical distance that allows them to individuate in the face of branding's mental tyranny. Remember, advertisers know that once an image has been placed in a person's mind, you it can't be taken out. This is the danger of the "head developing all its thoughts." But *rasquachismo* is alive and well among Mexican punks. When I saw Mexico City's premiere alternative music band Café Tecuba perform in New York City, the crowd's folk taxonomy was decidedly more "real" than that of the prevailing hipster crowd I had seen at the *Village Voice*'s Siren Music Festival the day before. The Siren Music Festival's Coney Island kitsch locale provided the backdrop for the predominantly white swarm of music fans that appropriated hip hop, punk, and White trash fashion, exhibiting all the signs of rebellion but possessing none it its content or perspective. This was evidenced by the uncritical presence of Budweiser, Army, and X-Box as ubiquitous sponsors of the festival; nary a peep of protest from the cheap beer-drinking crowd. By contrast, at the Café Tacuba show immigrant youth, who are forced to live invisible lives in one of the most visually stimulating cities in the world, fully engaged satire as an instrument of mental mutiny. Several kids had the "Hecho en Mexico" (Made in Mexico) clothing label tattooed on the backs of their necks, while others slam danced with Mexican wrestler masks. You couldn't tell if it was a rock concert or *luche libre* wrestling match (Mexican wrestling has long been associated with working class resistance). In the metropolis at the center of global marketing, Mexican youth asserted their identity by contextualizing it with grave humor and irony.

In Mexico City, *naco* ("tacky" or "trashy") is synonymous with cool. As one T-shirt company writes on its MySpace page (with misspellings intact),

Naco is originally a derogative term used by upper and middle class Mexicans to describe things and people they felt were way beneath them in terms of hipness, taste and economic status. It's usually employed as a synonym for "poor & ignorant", but Naco-ness knows no economic or educational boundaries. Naco-ness is about complete earnestness. The typical Naco is very passionate bout his/hers likes. They will argue for hours on end that Quiet Riot is, indeed, the best band ever, after Creedence Clearwater Revival, of course. Their dislikes are irrelevant. Naco-ness is a style that goes beyond kitsch, camp or plain old cheesiness. It is very spiritual in its acceptance of the Self, and so, if one's Self wants to dress in unbuttoned brightly colored shiny shirts, skin-tight faded black jeans, gold chains,

> white socks and black shoes, topped off by a magnificent mullet, so be it. Naco is more a state of mind. It's more a self assured disregard for what others think is cool without being arrogant or closeminded. Naco-ness is about being your own person regardless of if you're ever in the right or not. Ultimately, Naconess is about being yourself...[8]

Contrast this with Williamsburg, the Brooklyn neighborhood that has been at the center of contemporary American cool, which launched the everyman trailer trash look that has spread across American malls. The look is "keeping it real" by slumming in working class culture. Built into all these style strategies, the common denominator is a return to some sense of authenticity. Lowbrow and low tech, we seek eternal return to humbler, less technological times. Cohen one-ups them by building a character that's a hybrid of an international class of hillbillies, recycling the clichés of incest and other prejudiced beliefs surrounding the global underclass, but also orienting us to a world that actually remains substantially divided among classes, culture and technological access. The need to mine the past for authenticity is to create a dialog with the present. Observes media critic Mark Andreyavek (2004),

> In short, what emerges in the promise in new media is a tension very similar to that noted of by Walter Benjamin in his excavation of the prehistory of consumer capitalism in the nineteenth century: the way in which the promise of the future resonates with the unfulfilled desires of a mythical past—what he referred to as an 'ur-past'… The deployment of the unfulfilled potential of the ur-past may have politically progressive potential, insofar as it offers an alternative to the given state of affairs, but as Benjamin's own analysis suggests, it can also serve as an alibi for the self-proliferation and extension of the logic of the present. (p. 26)

Confuse and Conquer!

In addition to disinformation and propaganda in the service of our war economy, there is also the ambient vocabulary of advertising, our ubiquitous social and religious subjectivity more commonplace than church altars and frescos during the Italian Renaissance. Sadly, the cultural practices initiated by Gen X in the form of irony have been thoroughly incorporated by marketing. Consider the listless, droll voice of the male narrator that doesn't care about anything, or the hapless male drinker of Bud Light who is perpetually perplexed and stupefied. It may be that postirony is the snarky aesthetic or wink-wink device for the ever "elusive" species of male consumers ages 16 to 34, AKA the mook. In short, the "mook" is a perpetual 13 year-old with thriving libido, Dionysian appetite, and cash to spend. He is also the Narcissistic stereotype often conjured when critics attack MySpace and YouTube for being cesspools of fart jokes and frat boy drink fests. And guess what? Like the drunken college students in the RV featured in Borat, they are soon entering the work force, just in time to mount the crushed emotional syntax of knowledge work.

One of the biggest disappointments concerning postirony is the demise of

culture jamming as a critical weapon against advertising, which is the act of taking the codes of marketing and aiming them back at themselves, a kind of pointing the mirror at the mirror technique. For example, a typical culture jam is defacing a billboard so that its meaning is completely reversed by rearranging its words or altering its image. Unfortunately, billboard "liberation" and guerrilla marketing are now common marketing techniques, and it has become impossible to tell what is social critique and what is a sales pitch anymore. There was a NBC billboard, for instance, that advertised the show *Friends* by displaying a picture of the show's three actresses accompanied by the tagline, "Cute Anorexic Chicks." Is this a feminist media critique, or the "wink-wink" persuasion method that tells us, yeah we know this is bullshit, but buy the product anyway? This technique was also used in Sprite's "Obey Your Thirst" campaign, which featured Sports stars mocking the idea that celebrities can convince consumers to buy something.

Additionally, these days it is very common to use deconstruction—a central pedagogical tool of media literacy—as an advertisement tool. A few examples include Sprite's "sublymonal" TV spots that poke fun at subliminal advertising while doing it, and Fed-Ex ran a commercial in which it showed audiences how to construct a successful Super Bowl ad. In some ways this is a victory for human intelligence: advertisers know that people, especially youth, are increasingly skeptical of the ad industry. People making ads, the primary practitioners of postirony, are probably the most cynical of the bunch. I take this as evidence that humans are not as stupid as we assume, and that advertising is less effective than cultural critics argue. But as the quote from the teen marketing conference explicitly states ("In a post-scarcity media world, there is no shortage of brands or media pipeline channels. Attention is the new scarcity"), the problem is the level of clutter that makes discussing such issues so difficult. You have to sift through so much crap to triangulate anything ethical. This may be the ultimate triumph of "camp." Recalling Sontag's (2001[1964]) discussion, she remarks that camp is a sensibility that one knows but cannot define. "To emphasize style is to slight content, or to introduce an attitude which is neutral with respect to content. It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" (p. 277). Because postirony is antipolitical in nature, it takes great skill to insert a "sensibility" of authenticity back into irony.

One such strategy is tactical media, and though he may not be conscious of it, Cohen deploys it with ease. Tactical media are micro-political interventions, if you will. They are fluid activities that subvert through flexible and malleable forms. Consequently, there are many ways to define and create tactical media, which depend on the fundamental ambience of our society's postmodern subjectivity, which is self-referential, reflexive and collaged; basically the "mash-up." This is why Lovink (2003) states, "There is no need for globally recognizable signifiers. Instead, tactical media work with the basic, but difficult recognition of difference" (p.258). Cohen plays this difference most clearly with the technique of "solecism"—intentional

word distortions. Through wordplay he defuses newspeak's snarky marketing language, as in the case of, "I am big like can of Pepsi," in reference to his male girth. But also as a foreigner from a decidedly un-sexy, dead imperial backwater like Kazakhstan, he can play up the contrast for affect.

With hoaxing as a prime technique, Borat's pranking is a malleable cognitive weapon that navigates perception and prejudice. In an MTV saturated culture of *Punk'd* and *Jackass*, Cohen understands how discomfort engages our critical faculties; it breaks us down emotionally. Admittedly, his characters make me squirm, especially Ali G. There have been times while watching him when I feel saddened by the manner in which he targets his victims. Yet Borat strikes us as a simple everyman who is naively trying to find his way in the world. In other words, he is "us," so we can project ourselves into his misadventure because in many ways we, too, are like country bumpkins when facing daily hypercapitalist mediation. The fact that he addresses us on camera is his way of garnering empathy, conversing with us because as the audience we inhabit the kitsch psychic realm of Kazakhstan. But in reality we're actually citizens of "Americanistan," some imagined nation that we occupy in our multimedia groupthink.

Borat is also an ambassador of reality TV. The film's mockumentary style is a hybrid narrative documentary, partly scripted, partly improvised on-camera action. Borat navigates this distorted zone of authenticity, much like the characters in reality game-docs who are half performing, half surviving the scripted desires of the show's producers. As many commentators of reality TV haves stated, this is partly a way for us to process and normalize living in an increasingly surveilled world. Shows like *Survivor* are also forums that help us cope with the experience of being mediated at the workplace. Trump's *The Apprentice* is the penultimate example of this trend. The mistake most critics make is that they identify the realms depicted on these programs as fake. I'd venture to say they are no more artificial than our daily lives when we perform a variety of roles as students, employees, citizens, and the public. The difference is a degree of surveillance and amplification.

What Borat does is remediate that experience by incorporating reality TV's aesthetic practices, but then hybridizes them further with physical comedy and social commentary (recall that the first show he sees on his hotel television is *Cops*). Imagine if such situations were exploited on shows like *The Simple Life* starring Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie. If you examine the subtext of that program, which in many ways is the reverse of Borat (for in their case it's the city sophisticates who visit "backwards" rural America), what you actually see is a very conservative ideological agenda in keeping with the show's host network, Fox Network. In the case of the city girls, they are ultimately the fools with no moral compass or values, precisely the opposite of Cohen's character. Though Borat is a flawed human, especially in his views of women and Jews, he has a distinct view of the world. In the end he realizes his infatuation with Pamela Anderson is based on il-

lusions, and instead falls in love with a woman who is the antithesis of Anderson's hypermediated personae.

Cohen also remediates the idea of a TV journalist. This is particularly evident when he appears on the local morning news program and violates every convention of etiquette, protocol, and respect for the medium, including breaching camera position and the pre-defined spaces of the TV studio. He mocks the self-importance that media stake in our world. Also, Cohen's ability to navigate postirony makes him a more effective reporter than Michael Moore. Though Moore's shtick has been somewhat useful in bringing important issues to the for, there is a certain pomposity that is out of step with the culture of postirony; postironists are too self-absorbed to incorporate an ego as large as Moore's. Borat's character is a true clown, his mustache a stand-in for whiteface (and a bit of a Groucho Marx rerun as well), and in doing so it becomes easier to insert ourselves as protagonists on his pilgrimage. This is bit like the theory of cartooning: the more general and simple your lines (such as *Peanuts*), the easier it is to project your imagination. The more detailed, such as superhero comics, are for older audiences who have less imagination than little kids. This is also in keeping with McLuhan's theory of hot and cool media. Moore is a "hot," well-defined character needing less interaction, whereas Borat is "cool"; he engages more senses.

In another gesture to postirony, Borat must be unbearably uncool to be cool. This is reminiscent of the cultural trend to mine '80s' nerd culture with movies like *Napoleon Dynamite*. As mentioned in the discussion of the "ur-past," it's not just a postmodern practice anymore to recycle the past; there is an effort to inhabit it. Uncle Rico in *Napoleon Dynamite*, for example, explicitly orders a time machine to reenter ancient times of media lore. In Borat's case you can do so through the film, or his Web site, which is the design antithesis of Web 2.0.

Just as the Borat film's graphics begin with footage from an imaginary scratched propaganda film, it concludes with his return to "Kazakhstan" where villagers now own iPods. A laptop sits prominently on the table where Borat's cassette-playing boombox was before. Though he's displaying technological cool as a sign of civilized advancement, at the same time he rejects Pamela Anderson's "plastic" for a more "authentic" women in the guise of an African American, overweight prostitute (the ultimate social pariah as we learn when he invites her to be his guest at the Southern etiquette dinner). In doing so, Borat's "cultural learnings" is trying to make our mediated culture more humane by inserting "authentic" humans into the mix. As for the poor souls of "Kazakhstan" who'll eventually enter the knowledge work economy, may they do so with an ironic rich diet.

Postscript

There is a disheartening downside to all the Borat hype. When the Halloween parade in Greenwich Village coincided with the release of *Borat*, that night there

were dozens of Borat doppelgangers roaming among the revelers, and the movie's infamous ice cream truck was one of the parade's floats. Did I see Cohen, or just one of his many apparitions flirting with the crowd? I also encountered several costumed revelers dressed as Dr. Seuss' "Star-Belly Sneetches." You may recall the story about conformity in which legions of Sneetches compete to outdo each other with body modifications in order to stick out from the crowd. With dozens of Borats roving the Village, would the Cohen character cease to stand out or get obscured as so much cultural product does in our media saturated world? Only truthiness will tell.

Notes

[1] Orwell, George (1990[1949]), p. 214.

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness

[3] KlaxonCow, fifth paragraph, Feb. 19, 2007 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qCK wPobh1EA&eurl=,

[4] http://whatteenswant.com/whatteens/index.jsp

[5] http://journals.democraticunderground.com/Plaid%20Adder/101, paragraph 8, 2/28/06

[6] http://journals.democraticunderground.com/Plaid%20Adder/101, paragraph 6, 2/28/06

[7] I can't help but think of Hummer H2 ads that repeatedly depict the earth as an alien landscape in which cars, served by new humans, must inhabit. The SUV is a kind of fugitive pose against global warming and vagrancies of impending disaster brought on by the onset of capitalism. Not surprisingly, the majority of these ads target women, not just female drivers, but also to "nag" the family patriarch into obtaining them.

[8] http://www.myspace.com/usanaco

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