



TACTIC:

# Détournement/Culture jamming

## COMMON USES

Altering the meaning of a target's messaging or brand; packaging critical messages as highly contagious media viruses.

## PRACTITIONERS

The Situationist International  
Adbusters  
Jon Stewart  
Stephen Colbert  
Center for Tactical Magic  
Robbie Conal  
Guillermo Gómez-Peña  
Gran Fury  
Guerrilla Girls  
Preemptive Media  
Reverend Billy and the Church of Earthalujah

## CONTRIBUTED BY

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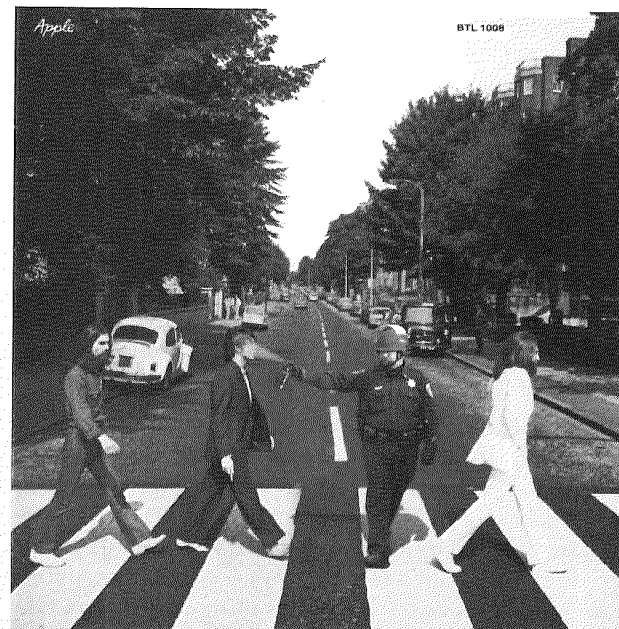
Urban living involves a daily onslaught of advertisements, corporate art, and mass-mediated popular culture *see THEORY: Society of the spectacle*. As oppressive and alienating as this spectacle may be, its very ubiquity offers plentiful opportunities for semiotic jiu-jitsu and creative disruption. Subversive and marginalized ideas can spread contagiously by reappropriating artifacts drawn from popular media and injecting them with radical connotations.

This technique is known as *détournement*. Popularized by Guy Debord and the Situationists, the term is borrowed from French and roughly translates to "overturning" or "derailment." *Détournement* appropriates and alters an existing media artifact, one that the intended audience is already familiar with, in order to give it a new, subversive meaning.

In many cases, the intent is to criticize the appropriated artifact. For instance, the neo-Situationist magazine *Adbusters* has created American flags bearing corporate logos in place of stars. The traditional flag, which is often used to quash dissent by equating America with liberty and progress *see THEORY: Floating signifier*, is made to communicate its own critique: corporations, not the people, rule America. Similarly, an *Adbusters* "subvertisement" for Camel cigarettes, perfectly rendered in the style and lettering of real Camel advertisements, depicts a bald Joe Chemo in a hospital bed.

*Détournement* works because humans are creatures of habit who think in images, feel our way through life, and often rely on familiarity and comfort as the final arbiters of truth *see PRINCIPLE: Think narratively*. Rational arguments and earnest appeals to morality may prove less effective than a carefully planned *détournement*

*"Détournement appropriates and alters an existing media artifact, one that the intended audience is already familiar with, in order to give it a new meaning."*



"Pepper spray cop" Lt. Pike strolls through the Beatles' iconic Abbey Road cover, casually pepper spraying Paul McCartney. This doctored image plays on the popularity of the Beatles to emphasize the callous absurdity of Pike's actions.

that bypasses the audience's mental filters by mimicking familiar cultural symbols, then disrupting them.

For instance, UC Davis police officer Lt. John Pike began to pop up in some unexpected places after he was captured on film casually pepper spraying students during a peaceful protest. One image depicted Lt. Pike walking through John Trumbull's classic painting *The Declaration of Independence* and pepper spraying America's founding document, while another depicted him in Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, pepper spraying a woman lounging in the grass. These images, and other *détournements* of "pepper spray cop," are some of the most visible critiques of police brutality in recent American history.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to its instrumental, critical function, *détournement* has an important humanistic function.

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the "pepper spray cop" meme emerged out of an incident in which the victims of police brutality were mostly white college students. By contrast, the brutal murder of Oscar Grant, a young black man, by BART police officer Johannes Mehserle, which was also filmed, generated nowhere near the same level of outrage. *Détournement*, as a communicative strategy that closely mimics dominant culture, often replicates—or even relies on—oppressive cultural assumptions and biases.

## FURTHER INSIGHT

"A User's Guide to *Détournement*"  
<http://trb.la/zvA2dH>

"*Détournement as Negation and Prelude*"  
<http://trb.la/zTgoFp>

Mark Dery, "Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs"  
[http://markdery.com/?page\\_i](http://markdery.com/?page_i)

Lasn, Kalle. *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*. New York: Eagle Brook, 1999.

Heath, Joseph, and Andrew P. *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed*. New York: Harper, 2005.

Destructables, "The Art and Science of Billboard Improvement"  
<http://destructables.org/node/>

Destructables, "Phonebooth Takeover Tutorial"  
<http://destructables.org/node/>

Destructables, "Shop-Dropping Product Labels"  
<http://trb.la/wLEUJZ>

## Related:

## TACTICS

Media-jacking p. 72  
Identity correction p. 60  
Guerrilla projection p. 52  
Guerrilla newspaper web

## THEORIES

*Society of the spectacle* p. 266  
*Ethical spectacle* p. 230  
Memes p. 242  
*Alienation effect* p. 210  
*Floating signifier* p. 234  
*Points of intervention* p. 250

## CASE STUDIES

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*Colbert roasts Bush* p. 308  
*Mining the Museum* p. 334  
*Couple in the Cage* p. 312  
*The Barbie Liberation Organization* p. 282  
*99% bat signal* p. 278