

*Pleasure Dome presents*

# **Culture Jamming for the Global Age**

At Cinecycle (129 Spadina Avenue, down the alley)

## ***The Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord***

Keith Sanborn in person  
Friday, November 3, 2000 at 8pm

## ***Stop the World™, I Want to Get Off***

Keith Sanborn, Jonathan Culp and David Murphy in person  
Saturday, November 4, 2000 at 8pm

*The Artwork in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility by Walter Benjamin as told to Keith Sanborn © Jayne Austen 1936, Keith Sanborn*

*Video Hacking, Manuel Saiz*

*Malcolm X Street & Reverse Peristalsis Painting from Undeniable Evidence, Igor Vamos*

*Which Will Be a Cop? Mike Constable*

excerpt from *Breaking the Bank*, Deep Dish TV & the Independent Media Center

*RIP WTO N30, PickAxe Productions*

*You Ain't Nothing: Alec Empire vs. Elvis Presley, Philip Virus*

*Free Ride, David Murphy*

*Dec. 3 1997 (Not your usual morning commute), DIY Bike Lanes & Fighting to Win, Toronto Video Activist Collective*

## Stop the World™, I Want to Get Off!

Pairing the new translation of Guy Debord's film version of *The Society of the Spectacle* with recent culture jamming and activist video proves to be a productive synthesis. After thirty years, it is unsurprising that a range of contrasts can be found between Debord's film and more recent anti-spectacle works, but a few points of divergence stand out.

The first is in the ubiquity of "culture jamming" in today's culture. *The Society of the Spectacle* is arguably one of the first films to consist solely of found footage and to use that footage critically. The freshness of this approach has long worn out, as found footage has become widely used by both artists and even, to a lesser degree, the commercial industry. In fact, even the more accessible elements of "culture jamming" have become popularised and corporate-driven. This goes from the more obviously commercial leanings of Tibor Kalman and his Benetton crew to the more critical--if still "lifestyle marketing" driven--Ad Busters magazine. The more politically sophisticated @rtmark has even taken the Situationist ideal of *détournement*--a type of sabotage or diversion of meaning--to the corporate sphere and realised a corporation that is devoted to the demise of corporate culture. This newfound popularity is interesting, especially around the newly developed Independent Media Center networks, for it means that even the lone local jammer is somehow plugged into a larger community from which to feed or react against.

The second point of departure over the last thirty years is that the debate has widened. As if it were the very embodiment of the "pornography for intellectuals" that late sixties Euro-art films were disparagingly called, *The Society of the Spectacle* is filled with a large number of nude women. One cannot fault Debord for realising that the relative dryness of his material would need a large number of pick-me-ups to keep the less committed viewer's attention, but his choice of stimulant draws directly from the tired chauvinism of French intellectualism, once again linking soft-core porn with crass mass consumption at the same time as it encourages the gaze. After watching this film, it comes as no surprise that the female students of May 1968 were relegated to the kitchens of the Sorbonne while their male colleagues talked theory and threw bricks.

The fight against the spectacle today has widened to begin to include, sometimes fitfully and sometimes successfully, the fight of women, queers and people of colour. It hasn't been an easy transition, but it attests to the new activism's ability to incorporate more themes into the mix and even be self-critical of the way people are being represented. That becomes most apparent in the excerpt from *Breaking the Bank*, which was a direct response of the lack of visible youth of colour in activist media and it stays as a theme of sorts (or noted absence) throughout the rest of the works displayed tonight.

Race consciousness is of the more cheeky variety in one of oldest pieces in tonight's

programme, where Igor Vamos documents the organised response to the renaming of Martin Luther King Street to Front Street in Portland, Oregon, but just as important to tonight's programme is Vamos' documentation of a stage between the *Spectacle* and now. Ten years ago, this level of street theatre points to a more nascent stage of jamming, when sabotage was still considered free speech. While it may be from an era of less brutal police response, Vamos' documentation of mashed potato(e)-eating activists protesting Dan Quayle's fundraising dinner back in 1990 still resonates today, especially with November 7 looming around the corner and with it the possible election of Quayle's honorary nephew, who combines George Senior's good looks with Uncle Dan's intellect.

The upcoming U.S. election of either George W. Bush or Al Gore is a contested event, especially as many activists do not perceive much of an ideological difference between the two candidates. In fact, there was a strong dissenting presence at both of the recent Republican and Democratic conventions as activists held anti-conventions that were satellite and web-cast through Free Speech TV. The infrastructure for these protests were drawn from the same diverse group of media activists that came together months earlier under the banner of the Independent Media Center for the WTO protests in Seattle and the IMF protests in Washington DC. The Independent Media Center was created in order to counter the uncritical coverage of the WTO protests that activists accurately expected from the corporate media. Drawn from media centres across North America, the IMC was able to cover the events from a progressive perspective and disseminate the information through print, radio and video. They compiled a two-and-a-half hour documentary called *Showdown in Seattle*, moved on to cover both the IMF protests and the anti-conventions and have planted close to two dozen other IMC's across the world (the most recent is in Israel, covering the slaughter of Palestinians from a grassroot perspective, <http://indymedia.org.il>)

While the IMCs are the most successful independent media movements, they by no means represent all the emerging media activist groups. A differing point of view of WTO was provided by *RIP WTO N30*, which shares with the more collaborative *Showdown in Seattle* the heritage of Chicago Newsreel and the *cine-tracts* of 1968--both earlier examples of on-the-street counter-information immediacy. Unabashedly anarchist, *RIP WTO N30* was quickly shot and edited during the first 24 hours of the WTO protests (November 30) and was made available soon after. Although very much shot from a rather white, northwest libertarian perspective, it captures the energy of those thirsty for more radical change as well as reinforcing the new activism's ability to allow for potentially fringe elements like the anarchist movement to take part in the debate.

Tim Lewis, who shot and edited the majority of *RIP WTO N30*, also contributed to the IMC's *Showdown* tape, which allowed him to toss his viewpoint into their mix. And, as mentioned before, *Breaking the Bank* expanded the debate in another direction by asking why the only black visible in the Seattle WTO videos was the black worn by the anarchists. In this excerpt, youth of colour are not dangled before the camera in a surface attempt to

include them and make amends, but are instead solidly positioned to question their place within the anti-corporate movement. It is a testament to the continuing attention to various viewpoints--a polyglot activism that the corporate media of soundbites can't handle--that the larger compilation, *Breaking the Bank*, includes this perspective alongside that of the anarchists and other groups.

November 30 was not only a catalyst to the activist scene; it filtered into the art and media scenes around the world, were some of the other videos in this programme were drawn from. The same night as the WTO protests, Alec Empire and his band, Atari Teenage Riot, responded to news of the WTO shutdown by throwing themselves into a tour-ending noise concert at the Brixton Academy. Revolutionary spirit has never been lacking in Alec Empire's Digital Hardcore entourage and Philip Virus' *You Ain't Nothing: Alec Empire vs. Elvis Presley* takes this insurrection to the King himself. Unrepentant in the face of the Presley estate's considerable copyright dragnet, *You Ain't Nothing* takes the scratch video techniques made famous by Emergency Broadcast Network's lampooning of George Bush in their *We Will Rock You* video and updates them to the DJ-rip of Alec Empire's music.

Also questioning copyright and asking for a bit of fair use are Keith Sanborn and Manuel Saiz in their respective pieces. Manuel Saiz takes Hitchcock into his home specifically to dismantle a masterpiece. Although he throws the tropes of Mexican insurgency and art history into the mix, the energy of the piece comes from the sense of agency he produces. This piece makes jamming look easy, with a video store membership and a computer the only required entry into active *détournement*. The unfortunate fact that the video is a tongue-in-cheek piece of fiction by a rising video artist does not deter from the fact that the kids can try this at home.

One of the local groups empowered by the ease of home video production is the Toronto Video Activist Collective, who draw upon the energy of collaboration and challenge that has been reignited by the success of the WTO protests and similar actions around the world. TVAC has been around for a few years and have produced two compilation tapes and a series of longer pieces, which are distributed through activist circles and the DiY music/video and zine crowd.

*Fighting to Win* is their most recent tape and the one that shows them at their best. It is an achievement in honesty (a different word than bias) that the tape leaves some viewers with a conflicted sense of the anti-Poverty demonstration on June 15<sup>th</sup>. The violence is on both sides, but TVAC reveals a maliciousness on the part of the police that is often hidden. This follows through on TVAC's commitment to progressive change through presenting a side not even covered by the local media and proves to be a local example of committed media. Perhaps, through technological changes, pirate television like Channel 15 or other means, TVAC's example may filter into a revitalised public access system, which could become a more representative city television. Someone has to point Moses Znaimer to

the promised land.

Even if this does not happen, TVAC's example points to a resurgence of counter-media. It appears that this will take many forms--from the ethos tentacles of the IMCs to the local protest of media collectives and artful vandals. Where May 68 goes down in history as the focal point of a climate that shut Cannes down, politicised filmmakers and allowed Debord's films to show in cinemas, N30 may become another myth-building catalyst--an all saint's day or all points bulletin for a new challenge of the spectacle.

-Chris Kennedy