FCJ-033 Beat me, Whip me, Spank me, Just Make it Right Again: beyond the didactic masochism of global resistance

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While the term 'information super-highway' might be making a bit of a comeback in a sort of retro-camp lexicon, those who place faith in the internet's radicalising potential are a little more subdued in their claims, than were its early champions. The idea of the internet as a novel means of making political causes noticeable has been undermined in part by the very success of the network itself. While cheap and ready access makes the internet a plausible way of bringing political discourses and actions into the public domain, the sheer proliferation of information threatens the conditions by which noticeability might be obtained. This is not a 'version of the overload of information syndrome' (Ribeiro, 1998: 110) but rather the claim that the conditions under which something might rise above our threshold of perception are both promised and frustrated by the very effectiveness of the internet. For noticeability in the public domain, we argue, depends upon there being a contrast between that which is notable and that which is unremarkable or ordinary.

To the extent that they seek in the internet a means of drawing attention to the adverse effects of globalising processes, critics of globalisation maintain a somewhat ambiguous relationship to the net. While the technologically determinist stance that identifies global technologies 'as the physical and organizational enabler' of globalisation (McMahon, 2001: 211) clearly overstates the causal relationship between technology and globalisation, any use of the net for the purposes of criticising global processes necessarily acknowledges its participation in these very processes. The question is, what is the nature of such participation? To the extent that critics of globalisation espy in the internet a means of making a difference, precisely what kind of difference is this?

The political significance of the internet is clearly irreducible to this problem of gaining publicity in order to make a difference. Equally notably, the internet has had a profound impact on the organisational dimension of political practice, enabling speed and extent of information dissemination unimaginable in a pre-network era (Klein, 2000). This paper, however, focuses on the problem of publicity, with the conviction that the organisational aspect of internet use is a necessarily less experimental realm. Use of the internet for large scale and often complex organisational tasks requires maximal efficiency and a minimum of ambiguity. It requires 'a reasonably straightforward establishment of ethos' (Gurak and Logie, 2003: 43) among participants and the reduction of noise in message transmission. According to Vegh (2003: 71) '(t)he scenario is fairly simple: (a)ctivists now take advantage of the technologies and techniques offered by the Internet to achieve their traditional goals.' As such, the mobilisation of the net for organizational purposes tends to operate within the dominant economy of truth and its correlative politics.

In contrast, the attempt to gain publicity through the internet has the potential to open up to a certain experimentalism. The stress here is on the word potential, for certainly the use of the internet to gain publicity may remain within much the same economy as the organizational dimension. Again, Vegh (2003: 71-2) speaks of complementary activities in the attempt to mobilise the net 'as an additional communication channel, by raising awareness beyond the scope possible before the Internet, or by coordinating action more efficiently.' To the extent, then, that the net is used as a means of bringing into the light already existing truths, and thus enlightening an otherwise ignorant public, it may enact a merely quantitative, but not qualitative transformation. There is an important distinction here between publicity and noticeability. For we will argue that what makes something noticeable, as opposed to merely public, is its capacity to rise above the threshold of the ordinary and enter perception. This entails an experimental attitude, since it is not a question of revealing what is already given but of creating. In an increasingly oversaturated information environment, then, it matters how one conceives of the political potential of the internet.

It is the success of varying strategic uses of the internet that is at stake here, for the way in which the dynamic of globalisation and its resistance plays out is tied up with the attitude one adopts toward the specific context of the internet. It is a question of how one positions oneself with respect to the opponent at hand, but also of how the opponent is positioned or, more accurately, created. And it is a question of the difference between a positing-of-what-is-given and a creation, in the fullest sense of that term. The point is that a different kind of difference can be made when the internet is put to the service of the creation of an event in thought, rather than conceived as a means of changing a given state of affairs.

7 This argument is given substance through the consideration of two distinct strategic uses of the internet made for the purpose of resisting certain forms and outcomes of globalising processes. We briefly examine the attempts of the superunion, the International Union of Food, Agriculture, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) to use the internet to increase publicity for their counter-arguments to the ideology of world trade. The IUF's use of the internet is instructive insofar as it typifies the rather didactic use of the net made by many of the new superunions who are keen to maximise their audience and power. We argue that the didactic impulse clearly discernable in the IUF's use of the net betrays a certain political idealism, and points the way toward some of the limitations of the IUF's strategies. Where, for the IUF, the internet functions as a means of increasing the spread of a message, in the case of culture-jammmers' use of the net it has been said that 'the mayhem is the message' (Whalen, 1995). This is no simple obscurantism, but a recognition that a play with appearances, rather than the revelation of deep truths, may be necessary to create something unexpected and thus grab public attention. The loose affiliation of culture jammers known as the Yes Men are examined to illustrate this strategy.

8 It should be noted that the seeming didacticism of our own argument is tempered by a recognition that the claims we make are pretensions, in the strictly degraded sense that word assumes in a representational metaphysics. That is to say, it is not a question of measuring the extent to which appearances pretend to the idea or participate in its truth. Rather, it is a matter of pretending in a more simulacrul sense and thus of bypassing the idea, shifting truth to the surface in order to operate at the level of (no-longer 'mere') appearances (Deleuze, 1990). Accordingly, in presenting two different uses of the internet for the purpose of resistance to globalisation we do not seek to provide a judgment based on their appropriateness to their object, nor to measure them against the yardstick of truth. Rather, our evaluations are based on the more superficial criteria of productivity: are they productive of something new and politically significant?

Taking it to the web: the educative enterprise and the dialectical imagination

9 In suggesting that the use of the internet for organizational purposes and as a means of revealing truths belong to the same economy, we are, of course, referring to the economy of representation. As much poststructuralist and post-representationalist thought has sought to demonstrate, a commitment to representation is simultaneously a commitment to a certain metaphysical distribution of identity and difference. Significantly, those strategic uses of the internet that emphasise its capacity to enlighten a maximally broad audience about the ills of global capitalism tend to fall into a certain repetition. In his seminal work on the metaphysics of representation, Gilles Deleuze (1994) distinguishes between two modes of repetition. In this context we refer to that mode of repetition that reiterates a metaphysics of identity. Put into terms of global resistance, we are speaking here of a dynamic that reiterates the very relation that resistance supposedly seeks to escape. There is a sense in which the act of describing global capitalism as the master of cruelty and the concomitant attempt to educate both the public and capitalism itself recreates a certain dynamic of power and resistance.

10 In the battle with an increasingly global capitalism, the internet has been embraced by many on the side of labour as a way of educating the public, and thus responding to the imperative to meet global capital with equally global opposition. For the IUF, for example, the internet serves as a means of demystifying the global capitalist machine, so to garner maximal support and strengthen the negotiating position of labour with respect to capital. Seeking to represent the interests of workers in food, agricultural, hotel and catering industries, the IUF has, since the 1990s, been one of the more active global unions. It has attempted, firstly, to negotiate labour agreements with transnational corporations to protect the rights of workers.[1] In addition to campaigns to

encourage the formation of unions among food workers in newly-industrializing countries of the Asia-Pacific Region, the IUF has engaged in research projects and the subsequent dissemination of accurate information about the activities and strategies of major global food corporations. Finally, the IUF has maintained an active web-site, which serves as a source of information and campaign strategy material for national unions of food, agricultural, hotel and catering workers around the world.

11 The IUF website (https://www.iuf.org/) is one of a large group of Internet trade union sites emerging in the 1990s to 'counter neoliberalism with well thought out argument'. The explicit aim of the website is didactic, seeking to provide information to members of affiliated food unions and the wider community and exposing the actions of multinational corporations to public scrutiny. The links provided from the main homepage are to a series of articles outlining struggles of working class people throughout the world and detailing the recent manoeuvrings of capital. The titles of some of these links are telling: 'Nestlé: Global Profits but No Global Rights for Workers'; 'The MAI: Alive and Well at the WTO'; 'Globalisation and the Challenge to Unions: A Union View from Unilever India.'[2]

12 The website seeks to counter commonsense, neoliberal justifications of trade organisations such as the WTO and, in particular, their agendas for trade liberalisation in food commodities.[3] Its recent focus on the WTO has aimed to provide accurate, trustworthy information to the labour movement and wider community in view of the remarkable power of the WTO but also because '.... the history of the WTO is a history of deception' (IUF 1). The didacticism and tenor of the expose is illustrated by articles such as 'Lessons and Lobster from Cancun,' in which the exposure of the indulgences of the WTO delegates at the Cancun summit inspires a lesson about the audacity of global capital.

13 Against the myths of the free market the IUF website thus presents the hard facts with which the victims of global capital are all too familiar. It also puts forward a program for global strategies capable of countering the effects of neoliberal ideology and the tactics of its proponents. In particular, the website argues the importance of the international labour movement forming alliances and coalitions with other non-government organisations.[4] 'Social partnerships' at various points along food commodity chains are envisaged, which will increase corporate social responsibility in various jurisdictions, perhaps in partnership with consumer organisations (such as 'Clean Clothes' and 'Nike Watch' campaigns based on the Internet) and campaigns among corporate shareholders (such as that explored for Rio Tinto shareholders by Sadler, 2004).

14 In many ways the site bears witness to the strategic ambition common to most superunions, by evoking an image of workers empowered to meet the manouevres of global capital point to point. In one article the site informs its audience about the WTO's ambitions of reviving thus far unsuccessful plans to create a charter of the rights of transnational investors. Such plans are denounced by the IUF as an expression of 'the drive by transnational capital to free itself of all regulatory limitations, actual and potential' (IUF 2).[5] Another article serves as a kind of counter to the deployment of rights-based discourse on the side of capital by calling for 'rights-based multilateralism for the world food system,' which would include 'the creation and enforcement of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) as part of the struggle for a just and sustainable world food system' (IUF 3). The impression that the ideal audience would gain is not only that workers' rights vie with those of capitalism, but also that the forces and means of the international workforce are of an equivalent power. Countering the evils of globalised capital and demonstrating the equality of opposing sides in the capital/labour war requires a good dose of anti-ideological realism, and the sheer reach of the internet makes it an especially valuable tool.

15 On the whole, the material on the IUF website adds up to a strong argument about the continuing power of corporate capital to dominate, and be the principal beneficiaries of, a singular neoliberal political agenda and to exert powerful influence over the WTO in its decisions about trade. Yet the conceptualisation of the WTO as playing a paramount role in globalisation is normalised not only by the neoliberal economic think-tanks and the WTO itself, but also by the oppositional discourses in which the IUF is embedded.[6] These help reinforce the neoliberal conflation of globalisation with trade liberalisation and the apparent significance of the flattening of differences between national regulatory regimes which control flows of direct foreign investment. The content and tenor of the site is thus to some extent dated by research indicating that, since the mid 1980s at

least, neoliberalism has developed very unevenly at the scale of the nation-state so there is now a variety of 'actually existing neoliberalisms' (Brenner and Theodore, 2002).

16 Laudable as their didactic goals seem to be, then, the strategies played out on the IUF website serve to reinforce the idea of the global scale as the primary action space for labour movement campaigns around issues of trade liberalisation, but also perpetuate globalist notions about the key role of global bodies such as the WTO.[7]

17 The way that the internet figures as a tool for enhancing the strategies of a superunion such as the IUF is both symptom and cause of the framework within which the struggles of labour and capital in the global age are conceived. In the first place, the internet is viewed by the IUF as a medium, in the most simple use of that term. It is a means by which a communication is affected, with its only specificity as a medium being its seemingly global reach. The instrumentality of this conception of the internet rests on a belief in the transparency of the medium. The internet serves as the means by which the IUF can publicise their frank and non-ideological reflections on the current state of affairs and reveal the facts that the ideology of global capital covers over. A belief in the singular nature of the true state of affairs is matched by a certain dogmatism of style. To the extent that the articles included on the site acknowledge viewpoints that diverge from their own, such views are invariably constructed as so self-interested as to be parochial and necessarily partial.

18 The point here is not so much to relativise the truth claims presented on the IUF site as to question the political significance of the use of the internet the site represents. Even if the IUF are right – and they are probably correct in many of the issues they raise – they are nonetheless confronted with the dual problem of a constantly dwindling membership and an increasing marginalisation from many previously attended decision-making fora. From a political perspective, being right may be of limited value. The point is not to negate the importance of issues raised by a superunion such as the IUF but to consider how the internet might be mobilised to deal with a problem specific to the age of global media; namely, how is it possible to grab the attention of an audience not only saturated with information but to some extent exhausted by the hard-fact strategy? For its part, the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM) gives some credence to the notion that politicising serious issues might require other-than-serious means, such as the online comic strip, 'Globot' (ICEM). Yet the ICEM remain committed to the program of *educating* its audience to the gap between the myths of globalisation and the reality of the dehumanised worker at the behest of global capital and its seemingly limitless insolence.

19 What is the character of the didactic impulse espied in such uses of the internet? At the outset, such didacticism betrays a commitment to a representational image of truth. This means, in the first instance, that truth is regarded as something that is pre-existent, merely waiting to be recovered or uncovered. Trade unions such as the IUF and the ICEM have truth on their side to the extent that the truth of their statements is determined by what such statements designate (the objective reality to which they refer). And the disclosure of truth is made possible by an assumed correspondence between the statements made in the name of truth and their object. Conversely, the discourse of global capital (clothed as it is in neo-liberal rhetoric about the promise of the global market) deals in falsehood to the extent that its claims disguise or cover over reality.

20 Importantly for politics, the possibility of action arises from this idea of truth as pre-existent, objective, relatively stable and able, eventually, to be brought into the public light. The operative idea of politicisation here involves a familiarly Platonic distribution of lightness and darkness. To politicise is to remove the layers of falsehood produced by mere appearances in order to subject claims to the light of day; to this end it is entirely consistent that Plato's famous parable of the cave should be found in his explicitly political work, *The Republic* (Arendt, 1958).

21 To the extent that the political potential of the internet is tied up with a representational image or economy of truth, the manner in which resistance plays out may be, at least in part, metaphysically predetermined. The seeming contingency (though predictability) of the torturous relation between labour and capital may obscure the metaphysical mechanisms that reiterate this relation of cruelty. It is in Deleuze's (1991) work on the literary writings of von Sacher-Masoch that the repetition of a relation structured by cruelty is linked most explicitly to the educative process and to the dialectical imagination it necessarily entails. We are already familiar with the application of the concept of masochism to realms outside the directly or explicitly sexual. Yet where the

commonplace use of the term to imply a morbid gratification in receiving pain tends to conceive of masochism in terms of an individual pathology or perversion, Deleuze's analysis underscores the limits of such a conceptualisation.

22 In the first place, this individualistic account of masochism fails to appreciate that masochism concerns a relation. Yet this is not to imply that the identity of the masochist is dependent upon that of the sadist, as conventional wisdom would have it. Deleuze stringently rejects the conceptual pairing by which masochism is understood as sadism's complementary opposite, arguing that the other of the masochist relationship is not the sadist who derives pleasure from the other's pain and is necessarily happy to have a worthy victim. This is partly because the sadist requires an unconsenting victim for his pleasures. But it is also because the sadomasochistic complex misconstrues the masochist as victim. Or rather, it fails to capture the particularity of the masochistic position.

23 Secondly, then, an overly subjectivist approach tends to miss the complexity of the power relations at hand. In his analysis of the personnel of the masochistic relationship Deleuze (1991) points out that the power relationship between the victim and torturer is not what it seems at first glance. While appearances would suggest that the masochist is an ultimately powerless victim, Deleuze focuses on the complexities involved in the didactic and persuasive endeavour. For while the masochist appears superficially to be at the mercy of the other, it is he who fashions the torturer, persuading them to partake in an alliance, devising the contract that will regulate that alliance and inventing the rituals through which the contract will be actualised. Deleuze (1991: 20) writes that in masochism we are dealing 'with a victim…who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer…' This educative task appears as something of an imperative in much trade union rhetoric in light of the copious instances recounted of the sufferings inflicted at the hands of global capital. But a site such as that of the IUF certainly does not intend to stand as a testament to the acceptance of the victim status. Rather, it conveys the image of the educator who faces at once the torturous machinations of capital and a public insufficiently informed to act, with a sense that the process of education undertaken is also a process of empowerment. An arduous struggle though it may be, the battle with an ill-informed public and an indifferent or actively cruel adversary is at least underway.

24 But here Deleuze's analysis of the masochistic relationship is again instructive, for he stresses that the task of education is an inherently risky and often frustrating one. This is because the educative task is an essentially *idealist* one. Deleuze argues that the personal element denoted by the positions of victim and torturer is always secondary to an impersonal, ideal or supra-sensual element. In Masoch's writings the machinations of the central relationships are impelled by the masochist's attachment to an Ideal (the idea of the torturer). Here the incidental features of the ideal torturer (the fur-clad, whip brandishing woman) are subservient to the two indispensable characteristics that the masochist's torturer must embody: a coldness or indifference and a capacity for cruelty. What is important is that the educative endeavour is, strictly speaking, an impossible task, for the malevolent party is ultimately an ideal identity created by the masochist. This is an education in which the educatee is not worthy of (not up to) the lesson, because their very identity is that of the ideal – as opposed to actual – torturer.

25 The profoundly frustrating character of the task of education is readily acknowledged in the discourse characteristic of many trade union websites. Formation of alliances are seen as turning points or as the 'first round victory' (https://www.iuf.org/) in a long and continuing struggle. But perhaps the relative and partial nature of success is not because the command of the torturer is so absolute and total but in part because of the representational structure in which the identities of labour and capital exist. It may also be because the operative idea of politicisation – making public as a revelation of the given – necessarily denies the 'creative' element involved, which is to say that it overlooks the fact that the state of affairs that appears to be given is in fact the product of a positing. Labour posits, or rather creates, capital as the hostile party, then seeks to enter into contractual relationships through which it, as educator, might derive a certain power. As the scare quotes around 'creative' suggest, the risk is always that this is a more reactive than genuinely creative understanding of political action. So the impression of empowerment associated with the education may be somewhat illusory. While 'it is the victim who speaks through the mouth of his torturer' he does so 'without sparing himself' (Deleuze, 1991: 22). Moreover, the malevolent other

can hardly behave otherwise; as Masoch's Wanda puts it, '(Y)ou made me what I am and now you blame me' (von Masoch 1991: 260).

26 The strategies employed by an organisation such as the IUF, exemplified in their recent uptake of the internet, certainly have their place. Yet it is important to challenge the seeming necessity with which a particular mode of action becomes a political imperative. It appears to be unavoidable that resistance become global and the political process seems invariably adversarial. The position of labour with respect to capital also assumes the weightiness of something inevitable, as does the need to enter into agreements with capital. As one advocate of so-called win-win agreements puts it, 'collaboration or die' is 'the biggest governance issue of our times' (Macrae, 2004). Win-win strategies have indeed produced positive outcomes with respect to workers' conditions and rights, but they have done little to challenge the conceptual, or rather, representational, space in which the dynamic of globalisation/ resistance is played out. This is repetition in the banal (and this word can no longer be seen as innocent) sense, a repetition that distorts difference through its recognition of the same old story, a story in which the identities of labour and capital remain intact (albeit globalised).

27 It is not merely the repetition of familiar relations that is at issue here but the failure to see in the internet new potentials for resistance. Indeed for some there is nothing inherently new or promising about the internet. As Marshall (2003: 1) writes of the new internet politics, '(t)here is no reason to assume the old order has lost or will lose – even if it may be slightly transformed.' But while Marshall (2003: 13) suggests that the internet 'is not inherently, of itself, radical' it is perhaps more accurate to say, at least in the case of trade union approaches, that there is nothing specific about the internet as a medium *per se*. Certainly it is no accident that a hard-fact style of didacticism would be effected through a representational approach to the internet. The idealism that underpins the educative enterprise is animated by the a dialectical spirit that is Platonic in nature (Deleuze, 1991). In the task of educating, the internet may well reach a broader audience than previously possible. But in assessing the potential of the internet to make a difference in merely quantitative terms there remains the problem of gaining the visibility necessary to give issues political significance in the eyes of others. How might a qualitative difference be made, such that something which was previously ordinary and unremarkable is perceived to be singular and noteworthy?

Working at the surface: playing with appearances

28 According to Adler and Mittelman (2004: 195), resistance is never merely negative, since it 'involves new ideas, organisations and institutions, daily practices, and a plurality of dispersed, local, and personal points of counter-power.' Yet it is certainly the case that some resistance is more easily defined in terms of an act of negation and by the negativity involved in the dialectic of political progress. How might resistance become at once more affirmative and novel? According to Roe (2004: 1) the capacity of the internet to open up to new conceptual and political possibilities hangs on its ability to shake off 'a particular idea of the interface,' namely, the textual model. Roe tends to be in agreement with Poster's (2001: 15) claim that printed texts elicit a certain (for him, modern) way of thinking; they tend to appear as 'representations of an outside world, nurturing the reader to reflect upon the representation as correspondence or contradiction.' For our purposes it is not so much the difference between a textual and what Roe (2004) calls a post-textual model that is important, but rather the link he makes between a representational approach to the internet and a particular idea of the surface that is the interface. Roe (2004: 1) suggests that the representational model 'has always presented an infrastructure that consists of a two-dimensional surface to which it sutures a subject in a face-to-face relationship.' We have suggested that the representational model presumes to hold the subject's fascination precisely because, in line with the being/appearance metaphysic it inherits, the subject is drawn to the truth that exists always *beneath* the surface. The kind of strategic use of the net exemplified by the IUF website hopes to suture the subject to the two-dimensional surface by enthralling them with the unfolding and revealing that will take place there. In what follows we elaborate an alternative approach to the potentials of the internet for resistance, which goes beyond the idea of politicisation as a process of bringing a given truth to the surface.

29 The phenomenon of cultural jamming is born of a perceived need for novel approaches to the criticism of dominant cultural and social conventions, in light of the specific character of global

power and the potentials for resistance offered by global technologies. A group of culture jammers such as The Yes Men are a good example of this form of resistance. They utilise internet technologies in order to parody institutions of global governance, such as the WTO. Colonisation of the domain names of such institutions has been a key strategy here, the Yes Men making optimal use of legal lacunae in domain name arbitration and the cost in time and money (even for the WTO) of prosecuting perceived offenders. The Yes Men (Theyesmen 1) claim to be:

30 > an international group of men and women who use any means necessary to agree their way into the fortified compounds of commerce, ask questions, and then smuggle out the stories of their undercover escapades to provide a public glimpse at the behind-the-scenes world of business.

31 This characterisation of their ambitions and activities forms the (very) small print included at the end of a page of one of the websites (https://www.gatt.org) surreptitiously colonised by the Yes Men. The website mimics that of the WTO (https://www.wto.org/), enabling The Yesmen to 'borrow' the WTO's identity and authority, or, as the WTO angrily put it, the Yes Men's site 'literally steals' the look of the WTO (Sayer, 2001). In addition to replicating the WTO site, the Yes Men's site enables them to harvest the email addresses of visitors to the official site. The copious references to the WTO made on the gatt.org page mean that some search engines direct users to it rather than to the official WTO site. Unsurprisingly, the Yes Men's stunt has given rise to some irritation on the part of the WTO, who claim to be encouraging of criticism of its role, but within reasonable limits. As WTO spokesman Jean Guy Carrier puts it, the Yes Men may have a 'serious argument to make for or against the WTO and we encourage that.... But not masquerading as the WTO... It's very deceptive' (Sayer, 2001).

32 The effectiveness of the Yes Men's online mimicry and their colonisation of the name of GATT (the precursor to the WTO) has, most famously, allowed the Yes Men to create havoc when, in 2001, an organiser of a conference on international trade law in Salzburg wrote to GATT.org to request a WTO representative at the conference. The Yes Men sent a speaker who delivered 'an alarming Powerpoint lecture about removing hindrances to free trade' (Theyesmen 2). Among other things, the supposed representative of the WTO argued 'that violence is acceptable in banana trade so long as prices stay low and trade is free.' To the dismay of the Yes Men, the audience showed no sign of reacting to their 'radical' claims, nor to the tenor of the presentation on the whole, which elicited little more than interested questions from the audience.[8] Significantly, however, this did not affect the Yes Men's assessment of the success of the event, which never proposed to be a mere counter-critique. After all, as the WTO themselves register, it is deception, rather than argument, that does the greatest damage (Sayer, 2001). The event – and its spin-offs – did generate a good deal of attention (Theyesmen 2).

33 In its most recent stunt, the Yes Men mis-represented the Dow Corporation on BBC World Television after an email came to their parody Dow site (Theyesmen 3). The email sought a representative of Dow to discuss the position of the company on the 20th Anniversary of the Bhopal tragedy (December 3, 2004) and the Yes Men subsequently obliged. Their announcement that Dow would take full responsibility for 20 years of suffering endured by victims of the tragedy because of Dow and Union Carbide gained a high degree of public attention (it was aired twice before the real Dow Corporation discovered it). It remains to be seen whether the Yes Men have gone too far with this stunt.[9] There are speculations that they might well face prosecution at the hands of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission due to the 4.24% drop in Dow shares on the Frankfurt Stock Exchange and the 0.6% drop on the New York stock exchange that immediately followed the announcement (Paterson and Bindra, 2004; Goldfarb, 2004). Though perhaps, in a sense, it is all publicity.

34 In what ways do such strategies go beyond the strategic uses of the net considered above? It can be said that the refusal of a didactic use of the internet enables the Yes Men to make a difference in thought because they operate in a register other than that of representation, which would invariably subjugate difference within the economy of identity (Deleuze, 1994). Difference moves not in the space between (real and imposter) identities but in the surface effects that constitute the event. And, though the Yes Men (Theyesmen 2) claim 'to provide a public glimpse of the behind-the-scenes world of business,' the political significance of their use of the internet is irreducible to the public revelation of otherwise hidden truths. The enabling distinction here is between the use of the internet as a medium for an ultimately suprasensual project and a

sensitivity to the sensual and sensuous qualities of the internet. To suggest that the type of strategy employed by the Yes Men involves a degree of receptiveness to the material qualities of the medium is not to reduce such qualities to the level of symbolic content (compare to Brügger, 2002) but to focus on the capacity of the internet to effect a disguise or displacement.

35 The motif of disguise has been particularly germane to discourses on the character and implications of cyberspace. The idea that one of the defining features of the internet is 'the absence of physical presence' has led to copious 'revolutionary claims for the kinds of identities available on-line' (Slater, 1998: 91). The difference between offline and online existence is often posited in terms of the difference between an embodied and disembodied experience: 'Would i exchange this body for a life in wires?' writes a participant of the mailing list, Cybermind (cited by Marshall, 2003). Of course, much has been written to critique the notion that the internet is an ideal medium of disguise because of the transcendence enabled by cyberspace. As Plant (cited by Ribeiro, 1998: 60) classically puts it:

36 > There is no escape from the meat, the flesh, and cyberspace is nothing transcendent. These are simply the disguises that pander to man's projections of his own rear-view illusions; reproductions of the same desires which have guided his dream of technological authority and now become the collective nightmare of a soulless integration.

37 Yet discourse about the potential of the internet to effect a disguise is poorly represented as a debate between advocates of the idea that the internet enables a certain transcendence of embodied identity and its detractors. Nor is it merely a question of an opposition between those unable to escape the moral demands of authenticity and those who wholeheartedly celebrate the possibility of new identities enabled by the internet. Rather, as Slater's (1998) study of the online trading of sexpics demonstrates well, those engaged in the attempt to perform new identities online may themselves remain highly precoccupied with the difference between real and projected identities and with the dangers associated with the identity of the impostor.

38 The novelty of the Yes Men's actions is diminished to the extent that a play on identity is seen as their central feature. It is not merely that this is not the most interesting dimension of their use of the internet but that it may constitute a false problem. It would be to remain too tied to the kind of dialectical imaginary that characterises the masochist relationship, whereby the masochist is 'a true dialectician, who knows the opportune moment and seizes it' (Deleuze, 1991: 22). Reducing the Yes Men's actions to a play on identity also applies inappropriate criteria to the judgement of the success of their actions; after all, the deception is invariably short-lived. It is more a question of the unpredictable effects generated by their actions, and these will best be discerned when our focus moves from the depths of ideal identities toward the surface. It is through the operations of disguise and displacement at the surface level that a difference is able to be produced in thought.

39 The role of humour is important here. In the first place, the Yes Men have a certain freedom because they do not take seriously their own identity as opponents of globalisation, or at least appear not to be constituted through any strong identification on the side of resistance nor any positing of an identity that they would oppose. Their actions and self-representations tend, in fact, to be characterised by a marked lack of gravity all round and humour in its various forms is key to their critique of global institutional authority. Critchley (2002) points out that the *modus operandi* of humour is displacement; it creates something new because it defies our expectations. Critchley suggests that this capacity enables humour to open up a gap between things as they are and things as they might be, thus working fundamentally at the level of the imagination. Yet a humourous mode of discourse is at its most interesting when it does not posit, nor refer back to, a given state of affairs. Put another way, humour is most capable of producing something new when it is not understood through a possible/real opposition, which would reduce reality to an ideal that pre-existed and conditioned it (Bergson, 1968). Rather, the kind of critique that a light-hearted relationship to the internet might enable takes thinking onto another register; namely that of the virtual and the actual.

40 Much has been written on the relationship between Deleuze's recuperation of the virtual and the medium of the internet. For us it is through Deleuze's (1993) reading of Leibniz that the concept of the virtual can be brought to bear most profitably on political uses of the internet. In Deleuze's *The Fold* the virtual can be seen as that reality that lies below the threshold of conscious perception, or 'macroperception.' To put it another way, the virtual is the realm of ordinary, obscure and yet

public 'microperceptions.' The process whereby something becomes singular or noticeable is that in which a differential relation changes the direction of habitual perception. To return to the Yes Men, the Yes Men's site GATT.org, has a virtual potential as it 'lies in wait,' barely distinguishable from the official WTO site that it repeats. What makes the Yes Men's site noticeable is the relation established by the mistaken chance encounters and mistaken chance invitations that the Yes Men duly accept. But even here we might not have reached the stage of noticeability. What is important, however, is that a series of relations and events is established and these give rise to something remarkable. Certainly it may be the event of the press release – in which the Yes Men own up to the hoax – that constitutes the threshold of noticeability (what Deleuze terms, after Leibniz, the *vinculum*). Yet it is in the obscurely perceived steps and relations prior to the announcement that divergence proliferates and the potential of the virtual is most powerful.

41 As Murphie (2002) notes, there is a sense in which the virtual has always been with us, and yet certain technologies and events allow its operations greater play. We have suggested that the sheer quantity of information on the internet may frustrate the attempt to act in a politically significant manner. But it is the publicity of the internet – and the proliferation of information that generates – that also provides the conditions of possibility for something to become remarkable. Note here that the condition of publicity is in a sense already met when the public is understood in the virtual sense outlined above, as that which is obscurely perceived. Here the virtual may be seen to challenge the distribution of lightness and darkness attendant upon representation, where publicity is achieved only after the hidden and obscure are brought into the light of day.

42 Understood from the point of view of the virtual, the internet's mass of information can be seen as so many obscurely perceived, public perceptions. As Kellner and Thomas (n.d.: 3, original emphasis) note, each time a user clicks onto an internet site or digital image 'the computer *performs an operation* on the data that *transforms* it into an actualized image.' Each click represents the actualisation of a new, qualitatively different relation. Nunes (1999) is right to register that the 'interface encourages users to navigate…primarily by way of drift: "browsing from link to link, rather than moving from destination to destination.' But it would be premature to see 'surfing the net' as necessarily more liberatory than travelling the 'Information Superhighway' (Nunes, 1999), when the attempts of the Yes Men to direct users to a destination is taken into account.

43 Clearly there is a qualitative difference between the event in thought generated when we, as authors, access the Yes Men's site and when a seeker of a WTO representative unwittingly initiates a series of displacements and a chain of events. The Yes Men's particular mode of playing with disguise and displacement, with lightness and darkness emphasises the internet's capacities in this respect. For what is exposed is never something given (a previously hidden truth) but the 'previously unthought' (Keller, 1995: 2).

44 This is possible because the internet is always more than a 'tool of representation' able to be more or less resourcefully used and manipulated. To suggest, then, that the internet enables the Yes Men to make disguise and displacement central to their operations is to evoke an alternative economy to that of representation. While the Yes Men's websites are involved in a reproduction of appearances they do not, in any metaphysical sense, refer back to the model. They function as simulacra, to the extent that that concept is understood not as a copy of the copy but as a challenge to the very logic of model and copy (Patton, 1994).[10] If the displacement affected in the Yes Men's gestures works at the surface, similarly, their disguise may be at its most fruitful when it is seen in other than representational terms. Disguise and displacement gain an autonomy from the thing or event that would be repeated or displaced and highlight the differential mechanisms by which something new might come about. Where a representational approach to the use of the internet (and the gravity that appears to necessitate it) risk reiterating familiar relations and structures of cruelty, disguise and displacement freed from the model may open up to the repetition of difference. Again, it is because the Yes Men do not subject the internet to the demands of idealism that a shift in political strategy is affected, such that it is no longer a question of attempting to change a situation given to us but of generating an event in thought.

Conclusion

45 As always, there is the task of finding a way of speaking about the political potentials of the internet without becoming caught in the utopia/dystopia conceptual trap. In a sense, resistance that does not seek to reveal the truth of a state of affairs so much as to create an effect (perhaps

through a proliferation of lies) bypasses the kind of criteria that tends to govern both utopic and dystopic assessments of the web. The projection of future possibilities or dangers is more the business of the idealist. For the IUF, for example, the essential identity of global capital is not in question, though political action may affect a change for the better. To the extent that the internet holds out the promise of increasing public support, it might have a role to play in making the unions big enough to take on global capital. And to the extent that strategic alliances might be made with capital, business between labour and capital might be carried out with fewer ill effects.

46 A less idealist mobilisation of the net has the potential to actualise the capacity of post-representational media to give rise to changes in kind rather than mere changes in degree. A mode of resistance that does not primarily concern itself with revealing the reality of things, nor with educating in order to produce a change, may be capable of bringing transformation about because it works with a different logic of truth. Truth is neither deep nor hidden but far more superficial, and thus effects a different kind of politicisation that, under the current conditions of globalised media, may have a greater capacity to cause a ripple, gain visibility and grab public attention. Boyd (2002) suggests that the 'infectious' axiom 'truth is a virus' might serve as a sort of mantra for political activity and, in his case, as a guide to his strange "career" in culture jamming and guerrilla media productions. He cites Rushkoff's analogy between 'media viruses that spread through the datasphere' and biological viruses that 'spread through the body or community.' Rushkoff (cited by Boyd, 2002: 1) writes:

47 > The 'protein shell' of a media virus might be an event, invention, technology, system of thought, musical riff, visual image, scientific theory, sex scandal, clothing style or even a pop hero – as long as it catches our attention. Any one of these media virus shells will search out the receptive nooks and crannies in popular culture and stick on anywhere it is noticed.

48 To suggest that political strategy in the age of global media might function in such a way is not to condemn action to the whims of fashion. It is, rather, to actualise the specifically political character of human action, which, after Arendt (1958), involves the capacity for initiating something that is fundamentally new and unpredictable. Beyond the masochism of beating one's head against the real, there may lie the production of new possibilities.

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Notes

[1] See for example agreements with banana corporations in Central and South America – agreements with Chiquita International were signed in 2001(see Fagan, 2002).

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[2] MAI – Multilateral Agreement on Investment.

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[3] A sample survey of the IUF web-page in April 2004, showed information pieces around issues such as industrial safety, GM foods, shift-work conditions for supermarket workers and the imminent collapse of leading Italian food manufacturer Parmalat.

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[4] For example The Rainforest Alliance in environmental agreements brokered in Costa Rica with Chiquita International over environmental standards in its banana plantations (see Bendell, 2001).

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[5] The MAI was effectively shelved in the late 1990s after successful political campaigns against it within and by the European Union and ultimate failure of the OECD to ratify it.

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[6] Recent research findings present a rather different story about the role of the WTO in neoliberal agendas. In relation to recent trade wars involving bananas, for example, research shows the continued importance of the United States' Government and European Union in controlling trade outcomes. Market shares by the 'big three' TNCs, between them controlling two-thirds of the global banana trade, remain political constructions despite intervention of the WTO in a dispute between the USA and EU (1995-2001) (see Fagan, 2005 forthcoming). Far from acting as the 'high court of globalisation', the WTO since its formation in 1995 has been toothless in enforcing its trade rules, especially in relation to the United States and European Union (see Brimeyer, 2001; and Fagan, 2005 forthcoming). Further, despite the central role of banana TNCs in the trade war between the USA and the European Union, their role has been quite different in other parts of the world banana market, for example in the Asia-Pacific region (see Fagan, 2005 forthcoming).

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[7] This has been echoed by the anti-globalisation protests in recent years focused on the symbolism of WTO meetings.

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[8] The only exception taken to the speech related to the 'WTO's' perceived insults to Italians, when the Yes Men claimed that the Italian practice of taking long lunches was evidence of the laziness of Italians. Such practices, it was claimed, were deleterious to the functioning of the free market and 'should be outlawed in the name of standardized business hours' (https://www.theyesmen.org/).

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[9] Certainly the Yes Men raised misgivings about raising the hopes of the victims of the Bhopal disaster but concluded that this risk was worth running given the publicity potential and the 20 years of false hopes and disappointment the victims had endured at the hands of union carbide.

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[10] Patton (1994) notes that the difference between a more Derridean and a Deleuzian understanding of the simulacrum hangs on the question of whether one identifies its logic with representation or finds in it the possibility of an alternative economy. For Derrida, the simulacrum still has a degree of participation in the idea, as a further removed copy.

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