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## **“The performative surprise”: parody, documentary and critique**

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Can parody help us to “re-imagine” the organizations and institutions we live with (Du Gay 2007, 13)? Or, like many forms of critique, does parody risk being incorporated: becoming part of the power it aims to make fun of? In this paper, drawing on Judith Butler’s work, I argue that certain circumstances enable parody to destabilize hegemonic, taken-for-granted institutions (Butler 1990). I explore these ideas through a reading of the *Yes Men* documentary (Tartan Video, 2005). This film features a series of humorous representations of the World Trade Organization (WTO). I show how these act to denaturalize and effectively critique this dominant force in global trade. This paper discusses the value of parody for helping us to re-think and re-make particular institutions and organizations. In doing so, I point to the importance of creating a spectacle in which parody can travel beyond its immediate location, so that it can reach ever newer audiences with its “performative surprise” (Butler 1990, xxvi). I suggest that the rise of the Internet, and inexpensive documentary techniques, offer interesting new ways for achieving this.

**Keywords:** Parody, Organization, Documentary, Internet, Resistance, Butler

## Introduction

Representations of organizations in popular culture have been the focus of a significant body of work in the field of management studies (Butler 1997; Hassard and Holliday 1998; Rhodes and Westwood 2008). Such representations, it is argued, can provide a means to critique some of the institutions we take for granted (Hassard 1998). The recent proliferation of low-budget documentaries that highlight problematic aspects of business and management, such as *Supersize Me* (Sony Pictures, 2004) and *The Corporation* (Metrodome Distribution, 2005), are a significant part of this. While debates continue about whether these “documentaries” represent fact or fiction, such films raise awareness about particular problems, and in doing so, spark debate (Thompson and Bordwell 2002). This paper examines one such film, *The Yes Men* (Tartan Video, 2005), and its use of parody to critique institutions. I focus on parody because both the film’s protagonists, and the journalists who write about them, repeatedly refer to their performances as parodic spectacles (Guerrero 2002; Yes Men 2002). Parody is generally understood as an imitation that aims to make fun of, critically comment upon or ridicule the original (Hutcheon 2000). In the process of imitation, the space between original and its parodic reproduction can flag up important features of the original, even as it reverses and pokes fun at them (Hariman 2008; Hopfl 2007; Rhodes 2002; Rhodes and Pullen 2007). Parody can, therefore, have a critical function: it helps us to laugh at power and imagine alternatives (Critchley 2007; Butler 1990). In particular, parody plays an important role in the ways in which we make and remake our understandings of particular institutions (Hariman 2008; Hodgson 2005). For example, in the *Yes Men* DVD, the “original” WTO is parodied, in order to draw attention to, and criticise, this institution’s activities.

In considering how parodic representations help us to imagine alternatives to taken-for-granted institutions, and critique power, an important question arises. Can parody *really* yield effective critique, or does it merely reinforce and legitimise that which it aims to change (Butler 1990)? If the former, what are the conditions under which parody is

effective? In this paper I address these questions. I begin by examining the concept of parody, focussing on its role in questioning what is taken for granted, and prompting political change (Butler 1990; Hariman 2008). I describe how parody is used to critique contemporary institutions and organizations, and highlight the importance of humour and spectacle in this. Next, I outline current debates on whether parody can be seen to be potentially subversive, or is a mere “safety valve” for the expression of criticisms that, in the end, have little effect. Having set the scene, I discuss these ideas with reference to the recent *Yes Men* DVD, which documents the parodic performances of this subversive activist group. I discuss the use of parody, spectacle and humour in this production, and argue that the relatively new medium of DVD and Internet, provides a unique forum for such critical humour to proliferate. Finally, I use this case to assess the role that parody plays in the critique of dominant institutions.

### ***Parody***

Parody is an act of duplication, where the original is placed “beside itself”, and the copy is used as a joke (Hariman 2008, 249). In this process, the limits of the original become exposed. What appeared to be serious is shown as ridiculous, “the powerful is shown to be vulnerable, the unchangeable contingent, the enchanting dangerous” (Hariman 2008, 251). In a useful history of the concept, Hariman shows how the “turning upside-down” allowed by parody is essential for healthy political and cultural debate. Plato used parody to make fun of self-important Athenians who took themselves and their role as guardians of civilization, too seriously (Hariman 2008). The tradition continues today; Hariman points to examples from contemporary popular culture, including *The Onion* and *The Colbert Report*, and examines their significance. Once a dominant discourse is “set beside itself”, the excessive, laughing imitations can destabilize the “original” and highlight its tenuous nature (Hariman 2008, 254). For Hariman, parody is what keeps contemporary civilization going; it enables people to continuously look at the taken-for-granted in different ways. Parody is an essential part of political life.

Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) is well-known for exploring parody’s role in political change (Parker 2001). In the context of gender and sexuality, she explores how categories that are taken for granted in society can be troubled by parody. Butler begins

by pointing out that terms such as “masculine” or “feminine” should not be thought of as pre-given, essential aspects of people. The concept of *woman*, despite how it operates in society, is not a “foundational category”, nor an essential aspect of some static self. It is, in fact, an “effect of a specific formation of power” (Butler 1990, xxviii). Her project centres upon unpacking that power. When a baby is born, we rush to ask, “is it a boy or a girl?” Why, she wonders, should this be our first question? Why is the male/ female distinction one of the only *compulsory* boxes that require ticking on the newborn baby’s birth certificate? Butler argues that society has long been invested in maintaining maleness and femaleness as primary and distinct categories. This distinctness reinforces discourses of both phallogocentrism and “compulsory heterosexuality” (1990, xxviii), which in turn, support the economic and cultural survival of a given nation state (Foucault 1990). Butler links the accepted primacy of the “male/ female” binary with the idea that heterosexual alliances are foundational to social life, and must be privileged above all other types of union. This has cruel implications for people who are left out. Homosexuals, transgender and childless persons find themselves outside of categories that determine what counts as a “valid life” (Butler 2004). It is vital, therefore, that we try to “open up” the ways we think about traditional, taken-for-granted categories like “male” and “female”; sex and gender are not “givens” but are observable aspects of the exercise of particular forms of power (Butler 1990).

For Butler then, *parody* plays a key role in opening up these traditional categories: aping and critiquing them, and highlighting their contingency. She uses the example of *drag artists*. While gender theory traditionally treats drag as degrading to women, reinforcing negative stereotypes of excessive femininity, Butler sees the practice somewhat differently. When a drag artist dresses up and parodies the notion of male or female, the effect is to challenge pre-held notions of gender binaries; drag can prompt us to question aspects of life we tend to take as foundational and unchangeable (Butler 1990). The *moment* itself, where we initially think that we see a woman, but quickly realize that it is a man, throws up questions about the “reality” of either gender. She notes, “if you examine what knowledges we are drawing upon when we make this observation, regarding anatomy of the person, or the way the clothes are worn”, then it

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becomes apparent that this is all knowledge that has been “naturalized” through a process of normalization (1990, xxii). The question thus must be asked, “What are the categories through which one sees?” (Butler 1990, xxii). For Butler, it is the vacillation that occurs between these taken for granted terms, when we are trying to work out whether it’s a “woman” or a “man” that stands before us, which puts “the reality of gender... into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal” (1990, xxiii). The *parody* here is important; it is in the “pleasure, the giddiness of the performance”, that we recognize the “radical contingency” of categories of sex and gender (Butler 1990, 175).

If we are left questioning the “reality” of the original, we are led to suspect that perhaps there is no actual “original which such parodic identities imitate... the parody is of the very notion of an original; ... gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an *imitation without an origin*” (Butler 1990, 175, emphasis added). Again, the spontaneous, momentary laughter is key; it bursts out when we realize that “all along, the original was derived” (1990, 176). In the years following the publication of *Gender Trouble*, these ideas were welcomed and widely adopted by those concerned with sex and gender oppression and discrimination, even beyond the academic audience for whom Butler was writing. This highlights the political impact of Butler’s parody (Blumenfeld and Breen 2001). Through parody, we laugh and we see things otherwise. In organization studies, Rhodes and Pullen (2007) discuss how depictions of men in *The Simpson* cartoon show up the fragility of masculine stereotypes (2007, 171). By imitating and parodying dominant conceptions of masculinity, the *Simpsons* episode they discuss “defamiliariz(es) the mundane”, makes it ridiculous and leaves it open to question (Westwood and Rhodes 2007, 5).

### ***Parodying institutions***

While Butler focuses on parodying *norms*, the parody of institutions has long been an effective form of critique. An early example is Johnathan Swift’s *Modest Proposal* (1729): a critical imitation of a commentary on the British Imperial system. The essay was published in the form of a “normal” political pamphlet. It was a tongue-in-cheek argument for dealing with the “Ireland problem” and suggested that, for example, poor

Irish be encouraged to sell their surplus children to their British landlords, so that they might eat them for dinner: “No gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child, which, as I have said, will make four dishes of excellent nutritive meat”. Parodying the earnest political commentator, Swift stresses that the scheme offers benefit to all, “the squire will learn to be a good landlord, and grow popular among his tenants; the mother will have eight shillings net profit, and be fit for work till she produces another child.” In presenting such arguments in a logical, rational tone, Swift critiques aspects of British imperialism: the prevalent anti-Catholic sentiment, the greed of landlords, the institutionalization of poverty in Ireland and the disengaged, cold nature of the political pamphlet as a means of representation. He achieves this by parodying the pamphlet form itself (Anderson 1991).

Parody can also perform such a “critical function” in the treatment of *contemporary* institutions and organizations (Rhodes 2002; Rhodes and Pullen 2007). Westwood (2004) describes a corporate comedian who visits organizations, and puts on a show that involves imitating and parodying the senior managers, corporate slogans and logos particular to that organization. Rhodes (2002) discusses how the TV show *South Park* frequently “mocks, satirises and undermines official institutions” (2002, 294). In an analysis of one episode, he explores its portrayal of a global corporation, *Starbucks*. Presenting *Harbucks*, a copy of the original, the episode uses parody to make important points about the way Starbucks does business. For example, the episode implies that manipulative techniques are used by this organization in order to enter new markets, when Harbucks is portrayed as ruthlessly taking over a local coffee shop and aggressively marketing a “kiddycinno” cappuccino, high in sugar and caffeine, to the children of South Park (Rhodes 2002, 301). In this way, the cartoon imitates and critiques aspects of the original. In summary, there is a long history of the use of parody for critiquing particular institutions. This paper’s focus on its use in criticizing the WTO, adds to this.

### ***Making parody work: humour and spectacle***

If parody is to work, it needs to make us laugh (Butler 1990; Westwood 2004). For Hariman (2008), laughter enables us to “relax” around power. Laughter takes away the

“fear and piety” we may have held in relation to a particular discourse; it makes an object familiar and, therefore, available for investigation (Hariman 2008, 255). The “doubling” function of parody is vital here: we would not be able to directly laugh at the serious and taken-for-granted “original”, but we can laugh fearlessly at its more benign imitation. Both Rhodes and Pullen (2007) and Hariman (2008) show how Bakhtin’s concept of carnival is useful for deepening our understanding of the role of laughter in parody. The carnival is a privileged place where the normal hierarchy is suspended and reversed. Here the “comic crowning and uncrowning of kings” can be enjoyed by all (Rhodes 2002, 296). This idea, that humour allows people to say things that they are normally not allowed to say, has been influential within organization studies. The privilege of critique comes from the compelling nature of laughter, from what is allowable through the medium of a good joke (Grugulis 2002; O’Doherty 2007).

In addition to the laugh, the *spectacle* is vital. Butler’s drag is a performance: overt and noticeable. Hariman argues that for parody to effectively form part of political debate, the parodic object must be “*held up to be seen*, exposed and ridiculed” (2008, 255, emphasis added). To work, parody must push that which is powerful, yet taken for granted, directly into the spotlight to be copied and displayed as a “carnavalesque” spectacle (Hariman 2008, 255). For example, Swift’s pamphlet is shocking; his recommendation for serving babies advises that “the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter”. We notice, we laugh and we see things differently.

### ***Parody and critique: subversion or incorporation?***

While the critical intent of parody is clear, can it really be considered an effective form of critique? What can parody actually *do*? As noted above, an important aspect lies in parody’s highlighting of the tenuous nature of much of what we take for granted (Butler 1990). However, parody offers more than simply highlighting such contingency. Parody takes fundamental “givens” in society and “cuts (them) down to size” (Hariman 2008, 254). This cutting can leave a particular norm open to question, and it is difficult to predict where this parodic re-examining might end up. For Butler (1990), parody shows us how a somewhat concrete, “given” in society is tenuous, and in fact is



dependent on repeated performances. If that is the case, each successive performance, or citation of the norm, contains the potential for alteration and, perhaps, for subversion (Anderson 1991; Hodgson 2005; Rhodes and Pullen 2007). Parody plays a key role in these “awry citations” (Butler 1990, 176). The play of parody in ongoing iteration of a identity can see the “apparent ideal”, “elide, slide, alter (and) shift” in a number of interesting ways (Borgerson 2005, 71).

In the realm of the political, Hariman shows how parody can yield a plurality of perspectives: a multitude of ways of looking at a particular idea (2008). Parody always works to keep power “in check” (Rhodes 2002), though this can happen in unexpected ways. For example, power can be reversed; having mocked the repressor, jokes can be turned around to laugh at the repressed. Swift, for example, levels jokes at the peasants of County Cavan, Ireland, drawing on a well-known stereotype that people from this area are mean: Swift cites their renowned proficiency in the art of stealing (Swift 1729). Similarly Rhodes (2002) shows how *South Park* mocks the local coffee shop owner whose premises is targeted by Harbucks for takeover, showing him to be just as greedy as the corporation itself. Rather than implying a particular political position, these critical imitations do not necessarily “tell us about the single right way, but rather work to parody and relativise power- to *always suggest alternatives...*” (Rhodes 2002, 305, emphasis added). This is not “the stuff of revolutionary liberation”, but rather the continuous, conspicuous and ridiculous inversion of the taken-for-granted (Rhodes and Pullen 2007, 176). For Hariman, these multiple, imagined scenarios are what keeps political life healthy: “the long-term effect of a public culture alive with parody is an irreverent democratization of the conventions of public discourse” (2008: 258).

### ***Parody and incorporation***

This optimism is not shared by all commentators on parody. One view holds that such critiques merely give the *appearance* of a “lessening of prohibitions” associated with a particular, oppressive form of power, where in fact, little has actually changed. Critique can, therefore, represent “a more devious and discreet form of power”, because it leads us to think that a challenge is in progress (Foucault 1990, 11). For example, while humour can form an important part of employee resistance in workplaces (Taylor and

Bain 2003), it can also contribute to the maintenance of “routine and order”, acting as a “safety valve” for the expression of dissent (O’Doherty 2007, 199, see also Collinson 2002; Kavanagh and O’Sullivan 2007). For these reasons, humorous critiques and parodies are often considered to be ambivalent in their relationship to power (Grugulis 2002; Hodgson 2005; Westwood 2004).

Related to this argument about the ambivalence of parody is the idea that parody is *dependent* upon the original that it imitates and makes fun of. Parody is always, in some way, subject to this original. This dependency is dangerous, and means that parodic critique runs the risk of being compromised (Butler 1990). A parodic act will always take place from *within* a particular power-knowledge matrix; if “subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law” (Butler 1990, 119). Drag performances, for example, draw on representations of gender from the dominant, “hegemonic, misogynist culture” (1990, 176). Westwood’s (2004) account of a corporate comedian highlights this problem. The comedian is paid to perform at company get-togethers by senior managers, many of whom are made fun of in his act. In mocking these managers, however, the comedian has to be careful not to be too harsh. After one, particularly scathing, performance, his cheque arrived but was “slow in coming, and then it was for only half the amount” (2004: 782). The comedian could transgress boundaries and parody power, but was only allowed to go so far. The danger of parodic repetitions being subsumed by “the power one opposes”, and becoming “an instrument of (it)”, is always present (Butler 1990, xxvi).

This leads to the question of what happens to its critical force, when humour becomes commercialized. If parody, for example, is put up for sale, has it “sold out”? If we purchase *The Onion*, and this newspaper depends on sales to make profit, can it still be seen as a valid form of critique? Picasso argues that it cannot, in his *Protestation* over surrealist painters’ forays into the world of commerce. He criticizes artists who engage in “subversion for sale”, including Max Ernst’s designing of theatre backdrops, Magritte’s work for Shell Oil advertisements, and Dali’s *Vogue* covers. The debate continues into recent discussions of the political potential of organizational humour, where this humour is sold as a commodity (Kavanagh and O’Sullivan 2007). Parker

discusses increased sales of “anti-work culture” artefacts, such as mugs and framed slogans, arguing that such critique can only ever be ambivalent with respect to power (2007, 88). According to Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), cynicism is big business in contemporary Western societies, and where it is mass-marketed and sold for profit, the sharp edge of cultural critique is deadened (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). Discussing the commoditization of *parody*, Butler likens it to the way in which metaphors “lose their metaphoricity, as they congeal through time into concepts” (1990, xxi). Similarly, when subversive, parodic performances are repeated over and over, in response to demands from contemporary consumers, they “always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where ‘subversion’ carries market value” (1990, xxi). It appears, therefore, that parody can reinforce that which it aims to critique, and can be rendered “deadened” through economic incorporation.

### ***Incorporation or subversion?***

In summary, parody and critical imitation can problematize aspects of life that we taken for granted. They can, for example, help us to “re-imagine” the organizations and institutions that form part of daily life, a necessary step in political change (Du Gay 2007, 13). As we laugh, we realize the contingency of what we have taken for granted: the serious becomes ridiculous (Hariman 2008). Following Butler and Hariman, parody holds the potential for subversion of a given “law”, or norm, through the “possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself” (Butler 1990, 119). Like all forms of critique however, parodic representations risk becoming incorporated: reinforcing that which they might wish to destabilize. As Hariman argues, parody is “neither radical nor conservative”, in relation to power, “but both at once”, because of the inherent ambivalence described above (2008, 254). By itself, therefore, parody is not subversive (Butler 1990, 176). It is only “certain kinds of parodic repetitions (that are) effectively disruptive, truly troubling”, while other such performances risk becoming “domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony” (1990: 176). For example, in her chapter, *Subversive Bodily Acts* (1993), she describes the kinds of “parodic practices based in a performative theory of gender acts”, which *do* effectively “disrupt the categories of the body, sex, gender, and

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sexuality”, leading to these being re-thought beyond “the binary frame” (Butler 1990, 100). The point to note is that we cannot consider such things in the abstract, but only by examining a particular situation. Parody requires a *specific context* in order for it to be “truly troubling”, and to enable the kinds of mobilizations and subversions described above.

In this paper, I build on these ideas and ask how we can understand the role of parody in destabilizing perceptions of one institution: the *World Trade Organization*. I examine recent efforts by a group known as *The Yes Men* to challenge the WTO’s policies and practices. Through staging a number of pranks, releasing a DVD and continuing the conversation on the Internet, the *Yes Men* impersonated and poked fun at this organization. In doing so, they open up a new way of imagining the WTO, through pranks that are all the more compelling and difficult to ignore because of the laughter they provoke. Following Butler, I argue that this critique was effective due to the particular context of the parodic spectacle. I conclude by drawing out some of the implications of this for organization studies.

## **The Yes Men**

### ***Background***

In 1996, two men, Igor Vamos, an assistant professor at the California Institute for the Arts and Jacques Servin, a computer programmer in San Francisco, got together to set up a subversive activist group. *The Yes Men* was formed in order to poke fun at powerful interests who are harmful to society, and to do so in such a way as to draw attention to the serious issues at hand. The group carries out “identity corrections” (Lawless 2009; Yes Men 2005). These involve temporarily “borrowing” the identities of particular organizations in order to speak and act on their behalf. In interviews, Igor and Jacques cite well known historical parodies as inspiration for their stunts, including Daniel Defoe’s public suggestion that non-Anglicans be executed (Yes Men 2009).

Prior to forming the *Yes Men*, and contributing to the subsequent documentary, earlier identity corrections were carried out by both men. Jacques was working as a computer

programmer on *Grand Theft Auto*, a testosterone-fuelled computer game in which the player speeds around various cities in stolen cars. He replaced the normal “extras”, who walk around in the background of the action, with men in red swimming trunks who constantly kissed each other, and the players character (Silberman 1996). He was immediately fired, and became something of a hero in the gay community. In 1993, Igor had already carried out a similar “identity correction” stunt, while working for toymaker Mattel. Having founded the BLO (Barbie Liberation Organization), he swapped the voice boxes between Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls, just in time for the Christmas market. Little girls were surprised when their Barbie barked out “Dead men tell no lies”, while G.I. Joe complained that “math is hard”, before happily quipping, “I love to shop with you!” (Barbie Liberation Organization 2009). These pranks highlighted aspects of the world that the Yes Men saw as being problematic, and yet taken for granted, including the misogyny and homophobia passed on to children in the gaming and toy industries. Forming the Yes Men enabled Igor and Jacques to embark on longer projects, usually taking the form of mini-performances. The idea is that the group “turns up the volume” on the ideas, agendas and goals of its target organizations, in order to highlight the problems it sees (Yes Men 2009). Through costumes, props and simulation programmes, their pranks maintain a continuous spectacle of ridicule and parody.

### ***The documentary***

*The Yes Men* documentary was directed by the filmmaking team behind the acclaimed Sundance Grand Jury Prize-winner, *American Movie* (Columbia Tristar 2000). Shot in a video-diary style, the film follows the Yes Men’s rise to worldwide notoriety, for impersonating the WTO on television and at business conferences around the world between 2000 and 2002. This story is the main focus of the documentary, presented alongside vignettes about the history of the group and some earlier pranks. The tale begins in 1999, when Igor and Jacques set up a parody of the WTO website, using the domain name *gatt.org*. The website had a similar look to the original and could easily be mistaken for *wto.org* at a distance. On examining the text however, it is clear that the content on *gatt.org* forms a sharp critique of the WTO and its practices of, for example, prioritising free trade over the right to drink water for free, eat, treat the sick,

protect the environment, organize trade unions, govern and have a foreign policy. Igor and Jacques began to receive emails about all sorts of trade matters from people who had mistaken their parody website for the real thing. One such email was from the organizer of “Textiles of the Future”, a conference of global textile manufacturers, inviting the WTO to present at the upcoming event in Tampere.

The documentary tracks the Yes Men’s decision to go along. They adopt the pseudonyms Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno, and we are invited to watch as the pair prepare powerpoint slides, purchase sombre business suits and shave their longish hair into military-style buzz cuts. The day arrives and we see Andy presenting to the assembled delegates from the textile industry, in a lavish conference hall. He begins by outlining what the WTO perceives to be two key management problems of the day: how to manage a remote workforce, while simultaneously remaining comfortable. These problems are related, Andy argues, and “the solution is based in textiles” (Yes Men 2005, DVD footage). Pausing for effect, Andy whips off his business attire to reveal an all-in-one, gold jumpsuit. Turning to face the audience, a three-foot-long phallus springs from the crotch, with a little television monitor sitting on the end, level with Andy’s head. This, he tells the audience, is the EVA, or Employee Visualization Appendage. It enables the effective management of an offshore workforce by administering electric shocks to sweatshop employees. In addition, he assures us, the suit is extremely comfortable to wear. We watch the audience’s silent bemusement and listen as Igor and Jacques, post-conference, wonder why there was a lack of reaction in the questions and answers session. Surely, they wonder, given the number of PhDs and advanced degree holders present, a critical questioning of such an absurd schema ought to have followed (Yes Men 2005, DVD footage).

The remainder of the film follows *The Yes Men* on similar missions and features excerpts of supportive talking heads, including a shot of Michael Moore discussing the WTO’s role in maintaining abhorrent working conditions in Mexican border town sweatshops. Barry Coates, leader of the World Development Movement, is shown talking about the WTO’s agenda of reducing the legislating power of governments. Other pranks featured in the film include a presentation at a university in Plattsburgh,

New York, where the Yes Men, on behalf of WTO, proposed to solve global hunger by recycling human waste from developed countries to manufacture hamburgers, for consumption by the poorer people of Western nations. At an international trade law conference in Austria, Andy proposes, on behalf of the WTO, that the auction of people's votes to the highest bidder would be a useful solution to the staleness of democracy. Finally, at an accounting conference in Australia, Andy, aka the WTO, announce that in light of all its mistakes, the organization now plans to shut itself down. In its place, it will found an organization whose goals are not to help corporations, but rather to help the poor and the environment. After this announcement, a hoax press release was sent out by the Yes Men to over 25000 journalists, politicians and news agencies worldwide, and we watch a clip of the issue being debated in the Canadian Parliament. At its close, *The Yes Men* documentary urges viewers to visit the website [yesmen.org](http://yesmen.org) and through this medium to get involved, and to carry out their own identity correction pranks. Igor and Jacques call for people to get out there and "impersonate whoever holds power that needs to be criticized" (Yes Men 2005 DVD Footage; 2009).

## **The Yes Men Parodies: Effective Critique?**

Examining this documentary in light of existing studies of parody prompts a number of questions. Are the Yes Men correct in terming their DVD performances as parodies? If so, can these exploits form the basis for a critique of institutions such as the WTO? Are they actually subversive, and if so, in what ways?

First, it appears that the performances presented on this DVD are, in fact, parodies. For Hariman, parody works through "doubling" and "carnavalesque spectatorship" (2008, 253), where a copy is placed beside the original, in a public manner, leaving both open for ridicule. Just as Swift smuggles his critique by parodying and publicly distributing an "original" political pamphlet, so *The Yes Men* smuggle theirs into conferences, as a sombre-suited WTO official. Both forms of parody create a doubling, which is used to "turn up the volume" on aspects of the original and hold them apart for critique. At the Tampere conference, for example, the serious WTO becomes a "site of laughter" (Rhodes and Pullen 2007, 164). Part of the joke involves putting forward incredible

scenarios on behalf of the WTO; burgers made out of human waste and economic slavery in developing nations are presented as possible and desirable results of current WTO policies. The sudden appearance of the organization as a huge, golden phallus prompts imagining an alternative view of it; it symbolizes the WTO as an aggressive and cruel bully. In this doubling, the Yes Men's parodies confront the WTO with "an image of itself that it constantly tries to hide" (Hariman 2008, 258). In addition to critiquing the WTO, these parodies invite us to imagine things as they might otherwise be. By vacillating between WTO as parodic bully and the "reality" of the organization, we begin to question this reality. We see the contingency of what we may have taken for granted: it is the "occasional discontinuity(ies)" prompted by pranks like this, which "reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this 'ground'" (Butler 1990, 179). The authority and permanence of the WTO now appears to be fragile, sustained by "repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal" of a substantial, permanent and powerful entity (1990, 179).

Furthermore, through the Yes Men's parody, we see how a relatively unitary, coherent image, such as the WTO's, can be transformed into a "field of proliferating voices", which point to a *multiplicity* of interpretations and possibilities (Hariman 2008, 253). For example, by the end of the documentary, when we watch the WTO announcing that it is shutting down, we have already begun to imagine this as one alternative. In their declaration of the WTO's disbanding, the Yes Men prompt us to think, "what if?" and "why not?" Parody forms a key role in re-thinking political institutions (Butler 1990), and this is important in maintaining public debate (Hariman 2008). Of course, parody is not the only means of achieving this: NGOs, trade organizations and journalists are continuously engaged in earnest discussions about the ethics of global trade. However, by allowing the temporary suspension of normality, parody can reinvigorate discussions that have been numbed through repetition, and by entrenched positions on either side of a stale debate (Hariman 2008, 260). As Butler notes, although parody does not "in itself, constitute a political revolution", it plays a role by promoting a radical shift in perceptions of what is possible, shifts that are necessary for political imagining. It is thus an essential part in questioning hegemonic, and potentially injurious, relations in society (Rhodes and Pullen 2007).



### ***“Providing an excuse”: the Yes Men spectacle***

The case of the *Yes Men* allows us to theorize about the particular contexts in which parody can be effective for enabling such radical shifts. First, the *spectacle* is essential here. The formula is simple: the Yes Men create a performance, involving over-the-top pranks, and this draws the attention of journalists. Press releases detailing the WTO’s disbanding even made their way into Canadian parliamentary discussions. The Yes Men feel that they provide reporters with the excuse to write about things that they find important, but that are difficult to justify writing about, “We can provide the fodder, sometimes, that lets these subjects (such as globalization) get covered” (Yes Men 2009). The golden jumpsuit and its three-foot phallus makes an excellent photograph, and the Yes Men’s brazen gatecrashing of high-profile events makes a good story. For the group, attention from the world’s print and television media is key. To date, their stunts have featured in *Fortune* magazine, *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, *Newsweek*, the *New York Times* and *Harpers Bazaar*. This kind of exposure is what enables the Yes Men to “turn up the volume” on their target institutions, and ensure that the kinds of destabilization and rethinking that their parodies can yield, reaches the maximum number of people. Without the ludicrous spectacles described here, the Yes Men would not receive the level of coverage upon which they depend. Routledge’s (1997) study of Earth First! protesters at the M77 motorway site in Glasgow describes a similar phenomenon. The activists provided a continual supply of media friendly events and spectacles, such as dwelling in trees. Routledge describes this as an “imagineering” of resistance, in which the *image* of the protest was seen to be paramount (1997, 359). Creating a spectacle is key.

Relatedly, in the case of the Yes Men, this spectacle is *not* a local one, designed for the people who are actually present during the performance. The crowds were small at both the conference hall in Tampere and the meeting room in Sydney; each comprised less than two hundred people. In both cases, audiences reacted mildly, mainly just nodding quietly at what was being presented (Yes Men 2009a). The Yes Men appear reluctant to engage with these people who have turned up, in their various professional roles, to hear

the WTO speak. Where Jacques and Igor do talk about them, it tends to be in a dismissive, somewhat patronizing manner; “a couple of people admit being mystified by the appendage, but *no one* is bothered by the content of the speech, including when they're reminded about the slavery issue” (Yes Men 2009a). Without asking them directly, the Yes Men deem their audiences to be weak-willed dupes for not reacting more strongly (Yes Men DVD footage, 2005). Reasons for this non-reaction, which could vary between confusion, politeness, or simply a culturally-embedded aversion to making a scene, are not considered. Non-reaction is interpreted as mindless acquiescence, but it could be that the Igor and Jacques have simply failed to engage their audience with their critiques. In the Yes Men, the pair they don't appear to care very much about the ambivalence that their performances prompts. They are open about the fact that they are more concerned about the resulting coverage in news reports (Yes Men 2005 DVD footage). In this way, local settings are overlooked in favour of the wider media of television, newspaper and Internet: the reaction of people who are present during their stunts is somewhat irrelevant. Routledge finds a similar phenomenon at the motorway protests. Here, the interests, needs and wishes of the local residents, whose lives stood to be drastically affected by the new road, were often overlooked in the quest for the attention of the wider press (Routledge 1997). These observations remind us, firstly, of the limitations of the documentary form of representation; as with any medium, film offers one version of events, in this case, the version held by Igor and Jacques (Hassard 1998; Rothman 1997). In addition, by focussing on that which is distant, at the expense of the local, we see the problems inherent to such “spectacular”, imagineered forms of resistance.

### ***Sharing the spectacle: DVD and Internet***

In the Yes Men documentary, we have a spectacle that offers a critical re-imagining of problematic institutions. In sharing this spectacle with the world, the Yes Men make use of two relatively recent technologies: DVD and the Internet. This highlights the role of these media for enabling future parodic critiques.

First, the link between the DVD and its associated website is important for the success of the *Yes Men*. Film commentators report that the relationship between Internet and film is growing ever more complex and interesting, citing the Internet-based hype which heralded *Blair Witch Project*, and the online discussions between fans and director which led to rewriting parts of the script for *Lord of the Rings* (Thompson and Bordwell 2002). Internet discussions about activist documentary films have become a necessary adjunct to the film itself, such as with Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). Michael Moore, a veteran of the medium, is currently using his own website to launch continuous counter-attacks against those who accuse his films of being less than accurate, calling the makers of the recent documentary *Manufacturing Dissent* (Liberation Entertainment 2007) a bunch of "wacko attackos". In the realm of organization studies, Prem Sikka's work on Internet blogs highlights the unique political potential of web-based discussion and organizing, for effecting change (Sikka 2008). In the case of *Yes Men*, visitors to [yesmen.org](http://yesmen.org) are urged to debate the documentary, and to join in themselves. The website encourages would-be activists and impersonators to just "go for it", and carry out similar stunts, with reference to other powerful interests in society. The site offers a discussion forum, help and advice on such pranks, and descriptions of identity corrections by would-be *Yes Men*. Interestingly, if such pranks are to attract the attention of the world's press, and be successful, they must be funny. Humour must always move forward, transgressing boundaries, and must always be new (O'Doherty 2007). In order to be funny, and effective, these pranks must always contain an element of newness, of performative surprise, and this implies that this kind of format encourages the proliferation of new forms of critique, rather than "deadening cliché" of repetition (Butler 1990; Kavanagh and O'Sullivan 2007; Parker 2007). It appears that the medium of the Internet allows the laughter, the discussion and the parody to continue, in the online debates that surround the documentary and the exhortations to repeat indefinitely. [Yesmen.org](http://Yesmen.org) provides an ongoing, "live" forum for critique and counterargument. The spectacle does not close with the final credit sequence.

A second interesting point relates to DVD technology itself. In the time between pranks, when the attention of the world's print media is elsewhere, the *Yes Men* DVD allows

the spectacle to go further, and to reach a wider audience. In this way, it joins the recent swathe of documentary films which highlight problems in society that “people aren’t talking about” (Yes Men 2005, DVD footage). We are currently witnessing an inordinate growth in similar DVD documentaries, due to changes in technology that makes them cheaper and easier to create (Thompson and Bordwell 2002). In addition, the Internet provides a very cheap and effective marketing channel for such films (Thompson and Bordwell 2002). This new genre is spreading widely due to such changes (Epstein 2005). This relates to Hariman’s (2008) point that parody must be “levelling”, in order to work effectively. By this, he means that parody brings the elevated, the austere and the untouchable down to the level of the ordinary. In addition, everyone must be able to participate in the parody. We can see from the *Yes Men* documentary that the particular mix of inexpensive DVD documentary, widely-available Internet, and press-release “activism” enables such a levelling. The overall “spectacle” of the *Yes Men* shows how the Internet, documentary and parody can form a potent mix for re-imagining dominant institutions and organizations.

### ***Subverting the WTO?***

Returning to the earlier discussion, it must be asked whether the *Yes Men* documentary represents an effective critique, or is merely entertainment. Revisiting Butler’s ideas, we note that the parodic spectacles depicted in this film, are always/ already located in a “commodity culture where “subversion” carries market value” (Butler 1990, xxi; Parker 2007). Certainly, the *Yes Men* have sold large numbers of DVDs and books in recent years. Despite this, the activists themselves claim that all such revenues are being channelled into future parodic spectacles, which echoes De Certeau’s observations on the possibility for critique within contemporary modes of consumption. He describes how, in everyday life, the “the products imposed by a dominant economic order” can be taken up and used by people in a myriad of ways, and often towards “ends” that are “foreign to the system” itself (1984, xii-xiii). In this way we seen how film production and Internet technologies can be used by “ordinary” people, to voice their resistance, and how even where these are commercialized, the impetus for critique can remain.

In addition, in considering whether the *Yes Men* DVD equates to subversion, it is useful to return to Butler's caution that parody runs the risk of providing the necessary alterity that ensures the continuation of the "the power one opposes" (Butler 1990, xxvi; Foucault 1990). It must be noted that it is this power that provides the very material for resistance and, therefore, resistance is always on *its* terms. However, this insight that we are always already mired in a particular set of power/ knowledge relations also means that we cannot opt out of the game of repetition; we cannot choose not to partake. "The task is not *whether* to repeat, but *how* to repeat... and, through a radical proliferation (of gender), to displace the very (gender) norms that enable the repetition itself" (Butler 1990, 189, italics added). In this way, activist groups like *The Yes Men*, who find themselves mired in a particular commodity culture that normalizes the WTO, either resist and subvert the culture, or do nothing and let the norms reproduce according to the operation of power and domination. We are all invited to laugh at the "vital instability" that is "produced by that performative surprise" (Butler 1990, xxvi), and decide whether or not we want to join in the fun.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Butler argues that if norms are performative, reiterated over time, then parodic acts form a critical role in disrupting, subverting and altering the performance. When *Yes Man* Hans Hardy Unruh, a parody of a WTO representative, whips off his sombre business suit to release a three-foot-long golden phallus, complete with "foreign worker control unit" at the tip, he provides both the textile executives in the audience and his DVD viewers with something of a "performative surprise" (Butler 1990, xxvi). What such acts of parody *do*, following Butler and Hariman, is to highlight the constructed nature of commonly accepted identities, in this case, public perceptions of the WTO. In so doing, the comedic upturning enables us to hold these perceptions at a distance, to examine and critique them, and perhaps to imagine how things might be otherwise. If such acts are to continue, they must always be fresh, and always funny. The pranks must move forward in originality, and cannot be predicted (Critchley, 2007). This new mix of parody, Internet, and DVD documentary can help us to imagine and re-imagine institutions that often appear to be beyond reproach.

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