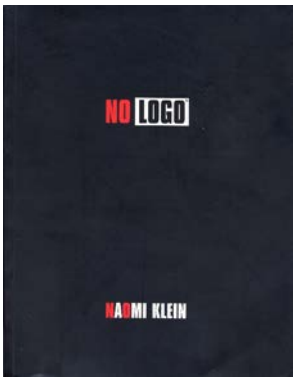
The guerrilla war against the marketing media

Unit 6

Unit 6: The guerilla war against the marketing media

John Aitchison



Naomi Klein is the author of ***No Logo*** (full title ***No space. No choice. No jobs. No logo. Taking aim at the brand bullies***) published in 2000.

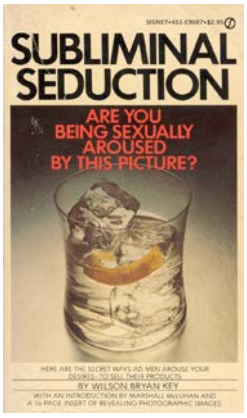
Apart from its detailed analysis of the role of branding in contemporary capitalism and its negative effects of public space, mental space and labour conditions, Klein's book gave an entertaining historical account (pp. 276-446) of the growing backlash against what advertising by the brand leaders is doing to society.

Klein's (2002) next book, ***Fences and windows: Dispatches from the front lines of the globalization debate*** gives an account of the growing coalescence of forces opposed to the negative effects of global capitalism.

False promises during the depression

Now, reaction against advertising is not of course a new phenomenon. During the 1930s Great Depression there were frequent attacks on advertising not so much because of false product claims but because of the cruelty of its obviously false images and promises of a wealthy satisfied society at a time of mass unemployment. The magazine ***Ballyhoo*** which targeted such advertising started in 1929 and grew to have a 1½ million circulation by 1931. Three features associated with this critique were photographs which contrasted the deceptive images on advertising billboards or posters with the poverty and hardship in the surroundings, the beginnings of a consumer movement, and the alliances formed with labour unions campaigning against sweatshops.

Attacks on the content and techniques of adverts



The next wave of attacks on advertising came from writers such as Vance Packard (***The hidden persuaders***, 1957, 1981) and Wilson Bryan Key (***Subliminal seduction***, 1973) who targeted the way that the content and techniques of advertising manipulated readers.

Predating these books was Marshall McLuhan's ***The Mechanical Bride*** (1951). This amazing work is a devastating critique

(though not a moralistic one) of advertising, done though a series of reproductions of adverts with a running commentary on them. McLuhan's aim was to make intelligible the real meaning of the advert, so that, as in a psychotherapeutic process, the reader can be released from slavery to them. McLuhan saw these adverts as synthetic dreams that dramatise the fulfilment of desires which society normally forbids or makes it impossible for the individual to gratify.

In advertising, modern knowledge and technical ingenuity is used not for the ends of knowledge but for control and manipulation. Psychological knowledge is not used to enable us to have greater self knowledge (thereby reducing the number of our actions that are dictated by unconscious motives and increasing those that are deliberate) but is commandeered by experts who have specialised knowledge of the susceptibilities of our unconscious mind and is used by them to dictate our behaviour without our knowing consent. With the modern social media this manipulation has gone into overdrive.

However, though McLuhan denounced the content of the advertising message, he drew a careful and crucial distinction between this content and the form of the advertising material. This distinction, never before made in this context, between the **form** and the actual **content** of the advert – the form being the presentation, the visuals, the shape, the style of wording, and the content being the overt message - "This is selling Berkshire nylons or Ford motorcars." He celebrated the triumph of the 'artistic' techniques of juxtaposition and contrast in these productions that enabled the advertiser to 'say' what could never pass the censor of the conscious mind (but which the unconscious mind hears, supplying the missing connections to the most seemingly diverse and externally unconnected facts and situations).

Attacks on the political, social, cultural and moral effects of advertising

A number of later 20th century political and cultural critics pilloried advertising for its negative impacts on the health of society. Such critiques range from left wing writers such as Herbert Marcuse (***One Dimensional Man***, 1964), to educationists such as Neil Postman (***The Disappearance of Childhood*** (1985), ***Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*** (1985), ***Technopoly: the surrender of culture to technology*** (1993)), through to conservatives who object mainly to the sexual imagery, innuendo and implied attitude to sexual morality in adverts which they see as ultimately destructive to society.

A subset of this critique, which like Marcuse and others, concentrates not so much on the surface technique of adverts as on their underlying message and ethos and its connection to forces in society, was that of feminist critics who saw advertising as reinforcing unacceptable gender stereotypes embedded within unsatisfactory social structures. A good example of a significant work on advertising in this tradition is Schutzman's ***The real thing: performance, hysteria, and advertising*** (1999).

Although these critics made telling points, they did not have much practical effect on the broad public because, apart from generally writing for an academic audience, they often suggested that the public or the masses were stupid and clueless or uncultured, or as Hilary Clinton in famously said: "deplorables". Klein notes (2000, p. 304) "As James Twitchell writes in *Adcult USA*, most advertising criticism reeks of contempt for the people who "want – ugh! – things."

Common to much of the left wing and feminist critics was a belief that contemporary adverts and what they displayed (particularly in relation to gender), though themselves a problem, were more symptom than cause of the maladies of consumerist society.

A quote from Erving Goffman's ***Gender advertisements*** (1976, p. 8), is instructive here:

> Gender displays, like other rituals, can iconically reflect fundamental features of a social structure; but just as easily, these expressions can counterbalance substantive arrangements and compensate for them. If anything, then displays are a symptom, not a portrait.

Alternative attacks on advertising

Counterbalancing the weight of society and its expression in advertising has been the aim of a number of alternative groups, who, from the 1960s onwards have tried to challenge the power of the media and the corporations behind them.

There are various forms of attacks on advertising and branding and the corporations behind them. One increasingly popular form is now commonly known as "culture jamming", a term coined in 1984 by the San Francisco band Negativland. and now applied to "the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards in order to drastically alter their messages." (Klein, p. 280). (The term jamming originally came from the attempts by Nazi and Soviet powers to "jam" radio transmissions to prevent the population from hearing outside radio broadcasts.) Culture jamming is linked to the desire to reoccupy public spaces and semi-public spaces (like shopping malls) taken over by advertisements where commercial messages are the only ones permitted. It seeks to regain the right of free speech which commercial power has effectively drowned out. Influences on culture jamming include the Dada and Surrealist movement in art, the drama student activists in the Paris student revolt of 1968, the various protest actions in the Anti-Vietnam war movement in the late 1960 and early 1970s and in the late 1990s flourished in a wide variety of small groups such as Guerrilla Girls in New York and Artfux in Washington.

Klein (2000, p. 281) notes that the most sophisticated culture jams are not defacements or simple parodies but ones that work a kind of semiotic jujitsu and "hack into a corporation's own method of communication to send a message starkly at odds with the one that was intended." Other see culture jamming as "improving, editing, augmenting or unmasking" corporate messages.

One prominent (in more senses than one) organisation was the Billboard Liberation Front of San Francisco whose Manifesto, reproduced below, gives a good sense of the aims and style:

Billboard Liberation Front

Manifesto

In the beginning was the Ad. The Ad was brought to the consumer by the Advertiser. Desire, self worth, self image, ambition, hope; all find their genesis in the Ad. Through the Ad and the intent of the Advertiser we form our ideas and learn the myths that make us into what we are as a people. That this method of self definition displaced the earlier methods is beyond debate. It is now clear that the Ad holds the most esteemed position in our cosmology.

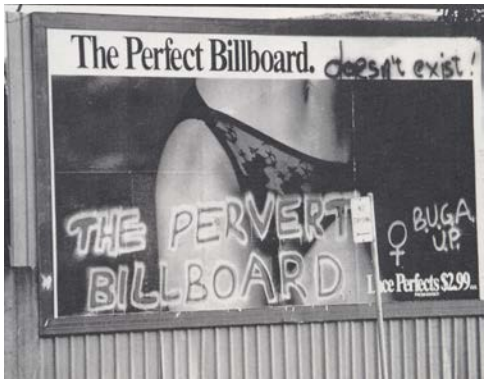
- Advertising suffuses all corners of our waking lives; it so permeates our consciousness that even our dreams are often indistinguishable from a rapid succession of TV commercials.
- Different forms of media serve the Ad as primary conduits to the people. Entirely new media have been invented solely to streamline the process of bringing the Ad to the people.
- Old fashioned notions about art, science and spirituality being the peak achievements and the noblest goals of the spirit of man have been dashed on the crystalline shores of Acquisition; the holy pursuit of consumer goods. All old forms and philosophies have been cleverly co-opted and re"spun" as marketing strategies and consumer campaigns by the new shamans, the Ad men.
- Spirituality, literature and the physical arts: painting, sculpture, music and dance are by and large produced, packaged and consumed in the same fashion as a new car. Product contents, dictated by trends in hipness, contain a half-life matching the producers calender for being supplanted by newer models.
- Product placement in television and film have overtaken story line, character development and other dated strategies in importance in the agendas of the filmmakers. The directors commanding the biggest budgets have more often than not cut their teeth on TV Ads and music videos.

- Artists are judged and rewarded on the basis of their relative standing in the ongoing commodification of art objects. Bowing to fashion and the vagaries of gallery culture, these creators attempt to manufacture collectible baubles and contemporary or “period” objects that will successfully penetrate the collectors market. The most successful artists are those who can most successfully sell their art. With increasing frequency they apprentice to the Advertisers; no longer needing to falsely maintain the distinction between “Fine” and “Commercial” art.
- And so we see, the Ad defines our world, creating both the focus on “image” and the culture of consumption that ultimately attract and inspire all individuals desirous of communicating to their fellow man in a profound fashion. It is clear that He who controls the Ad speaks with the voice of our Age.
- You can switch off/smash/shoot/hack or in other ways avoid Television, Computers and Radio. You are not compelled to buy magazines or subscribe to newspapers. You can sic your rotweiler on door to door salesman. Of all the types of media used to disseminate the Ad there is only one which is entirely inescapable to all but the bedridden shut-in or the Thoreauian misanthrope. We speak, of course of the Billboard. Along with its lesser cousins, advertising posters and “bullet” outdoor graphics, the Billboard is ubiquitous and inescapable to anyone who moves through our world. Everyone knows the Billboard; the Billboard is in everyone’s mind.
- For these reasons the Billboard Liberation Front states emphatically and for all time herein that to Advertise is to Exist. To Exist is to Advertise. Our ultimate goal is nothing short of a personal and singular Billboard for each citizen. Until that glorious day for global communications when every man, woman and child can scream at or sing to the world in 100 point type from their very own rooftop; until that day we will continue to do all in our power to encourage the masses to use any means possible to commandeer the existing media and to alter it to their own design.
- Each time you change the Advertising message in your own mind, whether you climb up onto the board and physically change the original copy and graphics or not, each time you improve the message, you enter in to the High Priesthood of Advertisers.

Jack Napier

John Thomas

Another group in Sydney, Australia, Billboard Utilizing Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions (BUG-UP) in 1983 caused $1 million damage to tobacco billboards. Some of these billboard "augmentments" are reproduced in Posener's ***Louder than Words*** (1986).



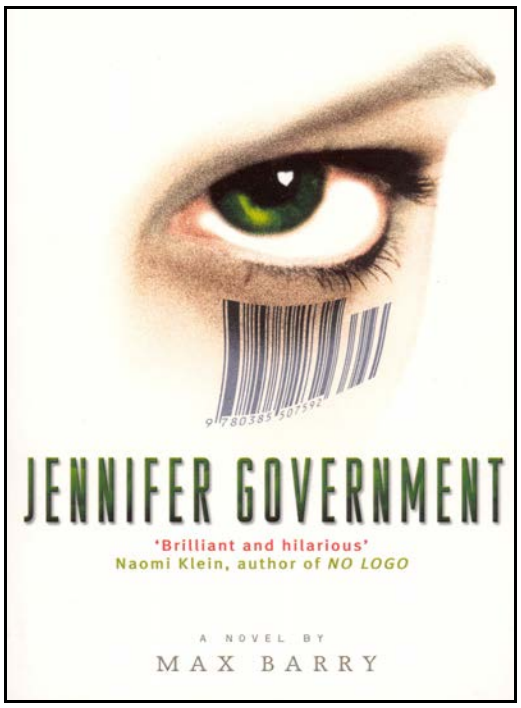
In Canada there is the long-lived ***Adbusters*** magazine who amongst their other projects take radio and television stations to court who refuse to air their counter adverts.

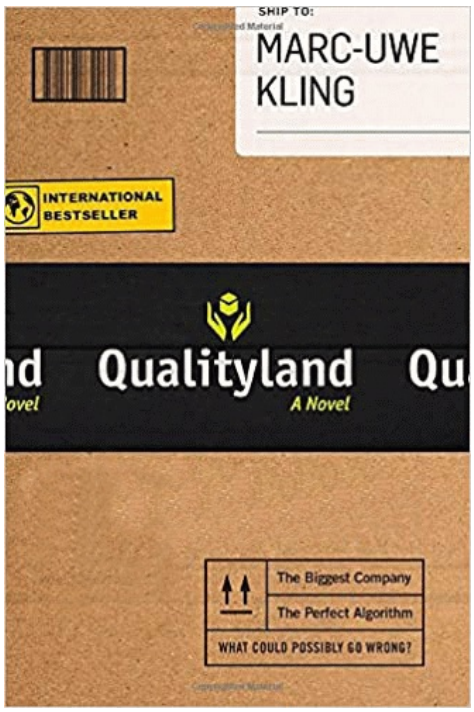
Adbusting or "subvertising" has been made considerably easier by the availability on personal computers of new print and media technologies and software which allows the sophisticated doctoring of full colour adverts, not that striking effects cannot be made simply with a black felt-tip pen. And the Internet has made the global dissemination of this information and culture jamming equally easy. Three interesting culture jamming web sites are: Adbusters magazine (https://www.adbusters.org), the Billboard Liberation Front (http://www.billboardliberation.com/) and the TAGG organization (https://tagg.org/).

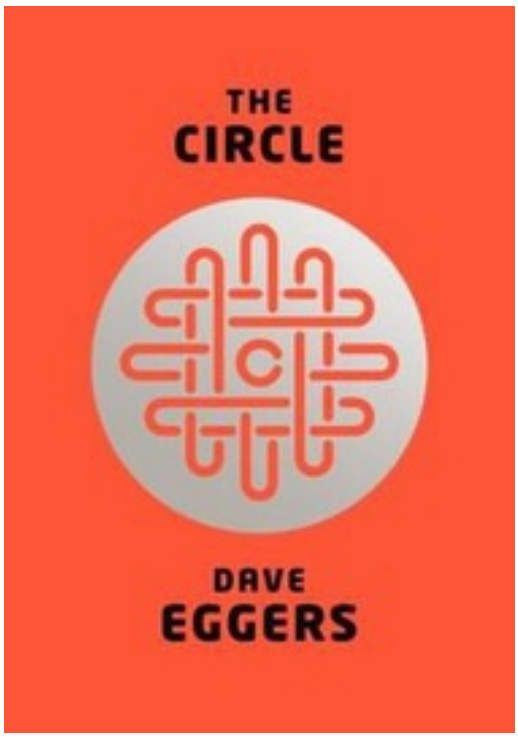
A wide range of information can be found on the Internet simply by searching for "false advertising" and YouTube also has a range of parodies and critiques of false advertising.

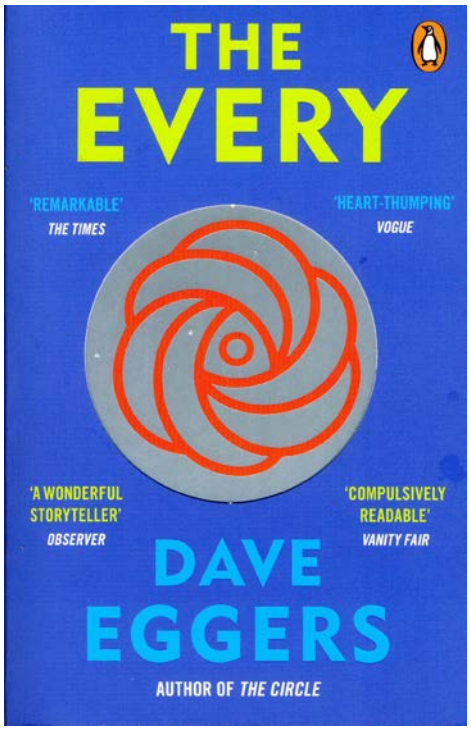
Mail and Guardian 4 January 2013

Novelists have also joined in this enterprise. Four more up to date works of satirical fiction are Max Barry's futuristic "detective" novel, ***Jennifer Government*** (2003) satirised the impact of the brand companies on society, Marc-Uwe Kling's 2021 ***QualityLand.*** which eviscerates the world run by Google, Amazon and Facebook with their political acolytes and Dave Eggers's two novels ***The Circle*** (2014) and ***The Every*** (2021).









Reaction and counter-reaction

A not insignificant number of people were quite delighted to see the images of corporate power subverted and mocked. One example of this was the incredible amount of support two individuals got when they were sued by McDonald's in the United Kingdom for libelling the firm in a small leaflet. People from all walks of society contributed to their defence fund and gave testimony for them in a trial that became a theatrical event that lasted nearly a year and, though McDonald's won the case in 1997, left the firm in a sorry state. People had increasingly come to resent the power of the corporations and their ugly commercialism that was invading every space left in public and private life. (https://www.mcspotlight.org/case/index.html).

The extent of this anger, though with a more overt political purpose was seen in the massive demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 and then Genoa in 2001 against the great industrial powers and the transnationals, a movement now somewhat overtaken by the climate change protests and demonstrations.

Naturally, corporations and brand leaders did not simply let this new antipathy go unchecked.

The first and most obvious is legal action (the film ***The Insider*** gives a chilling and true account of the way the USA tobacco companies tried to suppress and censor the information about their deliberate raising of the nicotine content of cigarettes to make them more addictive), the persuasion of the broadcast media not to air counter adverts or damaging documentaries, and suchlike.

In South Africa there was the Black Label court case.

An equivalent one in the United Kingdom was the legal action taken by the fashion chain French Connection (United Kingdom) when a comedian, Dave Griffiths, produced a T-shirt reading "CNUT – French Correction" in response to its controversial FCUK advertising campaign. He had to fight breach of copyright claims. Griffiths became an expert on copyright law and turned his experience into a comedy show and a film. "It will give people hope. It show you can fight back."

Naturally the advertising agencies have tried to co-opt the antipathy by giving it a cynical, ironic spin. Examples of this are the supposed putting down of image in Sprite adverts – "image in nothing, obey your thirst". Diesel Brand O campaign ads have been set in third world settings. Benneton tried a similar technique with ads that purport to shock and raise human right issues. Even French Connection tried it. But, Klein (2000, p. 299) argues that "the success of these individual campaigns has done nothing to disarm the antimarketing rage that fueled adbusting in the first place. In fact, it may be having the opposite effect."

The labour, human-rights and environmental activist alliances

In the late 90s an enormous growth in the power of the brands and the strength of the labour, human-rights and environmental activist networks determined to expose what the corporations behind the brands were doing. Their actions ranged from publishing information to throwing custard pies at corporation CEOs through to virtual terrorism. In all this they made full use of the new information technology that had previously been mainly in the hands of the corporations. The Internet allows activists to co-ordinate national and international activities with minimal resources and bureaucracy. In particular, the Internet facilitates the sharing of information without the need for inter-organisational consensus.

Generally the new breed of activists are as globally minded as the transnational corporations, which are increasingly being seen as the root cause of political injustice and ecological disaster around the globe. Further, they are seen as incredibly powerful political and economic forces, which is not surprising as, of the top hundred economies in the world some fifty-one are multinationals and only forty-nine are countries!

The oppositional alliance is made up of the following major groupings, many of them strange bedfellows (e.g. workers and ecological activists, normally natural enemies):

Students	Church groups
Schoolchildren	Labour unions
Parents	Exiles from repressive regimes (eg. Burma)
Political intelligentsia	Bored veterans of the anti-apartheid movement

The Anti-Sweatshop Movement

The movement against companies that marketed goods made under awful labour conditions in third world sweatshops grew apace in the mid-1990s. Television viewers were regaled with documentary after documentary that told shameful stories about the exploitative labour practices behind the most popular, mass-marketed labels – it would take a Haitian worker nearly 17 years to earn what Disney's CEO earns in one hour.

In August 1995, the Gap's freshly scrubbed facade was further exfoliated to reveal a lawless factory in El Salvador where the manager responded to a union drive by firing 150 people and vowing that "blood will flow" if organizing continued. In May 1996, U.S. labor activists discovered that chat-show host Kathie Lee Gifford's eponymous line of sportswear (sold exclusively at Wal-Mart) was being stitched by a ghastly combination of child laborers in Honduras and illegal sweatshop workers in New York. At about the same time, Guess jeans, which had built its image with sultry black-and-white photographs of supermodel Claudia Schiffer, was in open warfare with the U.S. Department of Labor over a failure on the part of its California-based contractors to pay the minimum wage. Even Mickey Mouse was letting his sweatshops show after a Disney contractor in Haiti was caught making Pocahontas pajamas under such impoverished conditions that workers had to nourish their babies with sugar water.

More outrage flowed after NBC aired an investigation of Mattel and Disney just days before Christmas 1996. With the help of hidden cameras, the reporter showed that children in Indonesia and China were working in virtual slavery "so that children in America can put frilly dresses on America's favorite doll." In June 1996, *Life* magazine created more waves with photographs of Pakistani kids – looking shockingly young and paid as little as six cents an hour – hunched over soccer balls that bore the unmistakable Nike swoosh. But it wasn't just Nike. Adidas, Reebok, Umbro, Mitre and Brine were all manufacturing balls in Pakistan where an estimated 10,000 children worked in the industry, many of them sold as indentured slave laborers to their employers and branded like livestock. The *Life* images were so chilling that they galvanized parents, students and educators alike, many of whom made the photographs into placards and held them up in protest outside sporting-goods stores across the United States and Canada.

Running alongside all this was the story of Nike's sneakers. The Nike saga started before the Year of the Sweatshop began and has only grown stronger as other corporate controversies have slipped in and out of the public eye. Scandal has dogged Nike, with new revelations about factory conditions trailing the company's own global flight patterns. First came the reports of union crackdowns in South Korea; when the contractors fled and set up shop in Indonesia, the watchdogs followed, filing stories on starvation wages and military intimidation of workers. ...

Though the revelations came out in the press one at a time, the incidents coalesced to give us a rare look under the hood of branded America. Few liked what they saw. The unsettling combination of celebrated brand names and impoverished production conditions have turned Nike, Disney and Wal-Mart, among others, into powerful metaphors for a brutal new way of doing business. In a single image, the brand-name sweatshop tells the story of the obscene disparities of the global economy: corporate executives and celebrities raking in salaries so high they defy comprehension, billions of dollars spent on branding and advertising – all propped up by a system of shantytowns, squalid factories and the misery and trampled expectations of young women ... struggling to survive.

(Klein. 2000. pp. 327-329)

You can see this jujitsu strategy in action in what has become a staple of many anticorporate campaigns: inviting a worker from a Third World country to come visit a First World superstore – with plenty of cameras rolling. Few newscasts can resist the made-for-TV moment when an Indonesian Nike worker gasps as she learns that the

> sneakers she churned out for $2 a day sell for $120 at San Francisco Nike Town. Since 1994, there have been at least five separate tours of Indonesian Nike workers through North America and Europe – Cicih Sukaesih, who lost her job for trying to organize a union in a Nike factory, has been back three times, her trips sponsored by coalitions of labor, church and school groups. in August 1995, two Gap seamstresses – seventeen-year-old Claudia Leticia Molina from Honduras and eighteen-year-old Judith Yanira Viera from El Salvador – went on similar North American speaking tours, addressing crowds outside dozens of Gap outlets. Perhaps most memorably, shoppers were able to put a face to the issue of child labor when fifteen-year-old Wendy Diaz appeared before the U.S. Congress. She had been working in a Honduran factory sewing Kathie Lee Gifford pants since she was thirteen. Diaz testified to the presence of "about 100 minors like me – thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years old – some even twelve.... Sometimes they kept us all night long, working.... The supervisors scream at us and yell at us to work faster. Sometimes they throw the garment in your face, or grab and shove you.... Sometimes the managers touch the girls. Pretending it's a joke they touch our legs. Many of us would like to go to night school but we can't because they constantly force us to work overtime."
>
> (Klein, 2000, p. 350)

Ironically, it was the very high profile of the brands makes them vulnerable to imaginative attacks, aided and abetted by the USA obsession with dragging its celebrities down into the dirt. The brand companies had always been worried about being tarnished by bad behaviour on the part of those they sponsored – for example Coca Cola was deeply worried that its image would be tarnished by corruption in the Olympic movement. Now sponsored events were being tarnished by being associated with the brands! In August 1998, Celine Dion's concert tour was picketed by human-rights activists in the United States because her tour sponsor, Ericsson cellular, was a major investor in Burma. Once associated with the Dion tour protests it took only a week for Ericsson's mind to be concentrated and the firm announced its immediate withdrawal from Burma. A similar thing happened to Suzuki when rock stars, including Hootie and the Blowfish, refused to perform at a sponsored Rock 'n' Roll Marathon in San Diego, California, in May 1999, because of Suzuki's business dealings with the Burmese junta. Band members insisted that a Suzuki banner be taken down before they got on stage and then performed wearing "Suzuki out of Burma" T-shirts and stickers.

Nike's comeuppance came from the very inner cities where the African-American heroes who endorsed its products came from. It began to dawn on black activists and church group that the very people who had done most to give Nike's swosh logo its African American and Latino vibe were the very people who were being most hurt by Nike's high prices and nonexistent manufacturing base in the USA. Soon anger began to be directed at Nike and at the Rappers "label whoring for Nike and Tommy". It was inner city youth (and their working parents) who were being most hurt by Nike's decision to manufacture its products outside the country – leading to both high unemployment rates in the inner city and to the erosion of the local tax and rates base (which sets the stage for the deterioration of local public schools).

Instead of jobs for their parents, what the inner-city kids get from Nike is the occasional visit from its marketers and designers on “bro-ing” pilgrimages. “Hey, bro, what do you think of these new Jordans – are they fresh or what? ... Nike has played a pivotal part in the industrial exodus from urban centers. ... And when the company’s urban branding strategy is taken in conjunction with this employment record, Nike ceases to be the savior of the inner city and turns into the guy who steals your job, then sells you a pair of overpriced sneakers and yells, “Run like hell!” Hey, it’s the only way out of the ghetto, kid. Just do it.” (Klein, 2000, p. 369, 371).

To get some idea of the depth of the campaigns waged on Nike and other brand companies look at these examples of website pages (though many such websites are ephemeral and do not function for long).

Understandably the brands such as Nike, Reebok, the Body Shop, Starbucks, Levi's and the Gap wanted to know why they were being picked on. Klein's answer is as follows (Klein, 2000, p. 361):

> They are singled out because the politics they have associated themselves with, which have made them rich – feminism, ecology, inner-city empowerment – were not just random pieces of effective ad copy that their brand managers found lying around. They are complex, essential social ideas, for which many people have spent lifetimes fighting. That's what lends righteousness to the rage of activists campaigning against what they see as cynical distortions of those ideas. Al Dunlap, the notorious job-slasher-for-hire who built his reputation on ruthless layoffs, may be able to respond to calls for corporate accountability with a rev of his chainsaw, but companies such as Levi's and the Body Shop can't shrug them off, because they publicly presented social accountability as the foundation of their corporate philosophy from the first.

Klein also adds in relation to Nike (p. 379):

> Over the years Nike has tried dozens of tactics to silence the cries of its critics, but the most ironic by far has been the company's desperate attempt to hide behind its product. "We're not political activists. We are a footwear manufacturer," said Nike spokeswoman Donna Gibbs, when the sweatshop scandal first began to erupt. A footwear manufacturer? This from the company that made a concerted decision in the mid-eighties not to be about boring corporeal stuff like footwear – and certainly nothing as crass as manufacturing. Nike wanted to be about sports, Knight told us, it wanted to be about the idea of sports, then the idea of transcendence through sports; then it wanted to be about self-empowerment, women's rights, racial equality, it wanted its stores to be temples, its ads a religion, its customers a nation, its workers a tribe. After taking us all on such a branded ride, to turn around and say "Don't look at us, we just make shoes" rings laughably hollow.
>
> Nike was the most inflated of all the balloon brands, and the bigger it grew, the louder it popped.

The response of the brands, the advertisers, and the media that serve them have generally been weak and unconvincing (see the Readings attached which come from the ***Economist*** magazine of 8 September 2001and were reproduced in the South African ***Sunday Times*** of 7 October 2001.

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