

Patron Saint of Lost Causes, Live on the BBC: The Yes Men, Humour and the Possibility of Politics

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At midnight on December 3, 1984 a Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India abruptly and without warning released 42 tonnes of lethal methyl isocyanate gas into the sleeping city. The official death toll released by the provincial Indian government was 3,787,¹ while estimates from other sources suggest that anywhere from 8-10,000 people died within the first 72 hours and up to an additional 25,000 in the years that followed from gas-related diseases.² This incident has since been referred to as the “Bhopal disaster” and remains the world’s worst industrial disaster. Dow Chemical, the company which now owns Union Carbide, continues to deny any responsibility for the tragedy, reiterating on their website that they acquired Union Carbide’s shares 16 years after it happened (and presuming that in purchasing a company one acquires only profits, shares and products, rather than existent corporate errors, missteps or worse).³ On a website they maintain outlining the company’s response to the disaster, Union Carbide also claims no responsibility for the disaster, instead highlighting the central role of Union Carbide India (a company that was in fact owned by Union Carbide) and private Indian stockholders.⁴ In other words, Union Carbide worked to deflect blame onto India itself and highlights only what it sees as its extremely vigorous efforts to determine the cause of the leak, which was eventually decided could only have been deliberate sabotage.

¹ Figure from the Madhya Pradesh governmental website: www.mp.gov.in/bgtrrdmp/relief.htm

² Figures from the Bhopal Medical Appeal website: www.bhopal.org

³ For Dow Chemical’s full statement in response to the disaster, see: <http://www.dow.com/commitments/debates/bhopal/index.htm>

⁴ For Union Carbide’s full statement in response to the disaster, see: <http://www.bhopal.com/ucs.htm>

Given this delicate manoeuvring around blame and responsibility, it was to a surprised TV audience that one Jude Finisterra, a purported representative of Dow Chemical, appeared on the BBC to offer an apology and to pledge a \$12 billion dollar compensation and remuneration package to the people of Bhopal. The announcement came on the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal disaster and promised that Dow Chemical would liquidate one of its subsidiaries to supply the funds needed to clean up the site, which has since been leaking residual chemicals, and provide medical care and compensation to the survivors. For two hours the headline “Dow Chemical accepts full responsibility,” was number one in the world; that is, until stocks plummeted by 4.2%, costing shareholders over 2 million dollars. Quickly, the corporation issued a retraction: the announcement was a hoax, a joke; there was no Jude Finisterra, and thus no compensation planned and no apology.

In fact, the announcement had been orchestrated by the Yes Men, a culture-jamming activist group that formed as part of the protests against the World Trade Organization that happened in Seattle in 1999. Made up of Andy Bichlbaum and Mike Bonanno (born Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos, respectively), the Yes Men operate by building fake PR websites for multi-national corporations and waiting for unsuspecting conference organizers or journalists to solicit speaking engagements via these sites. To take just a couple of examples, they have been invited to speak as Exxon Mobile at the National Petroleum Council conference (where they handed out candles made of “human fat”—a new product they were suggesting be made from the victims of the global warming and pollution being perpetuated by the oil industry) and as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) at a 2006 Gulf Coast Reconstruction conference (where they announced that HUD, rather than continuing to close down much needed public housing, would reopen housing projects that remain inexplicably closed, despite being intact and habitable).⁵ Similarly, when the BBC stumbled upon the website *dowethics.com* and unwittingly extended an invitation to the Yes Men-as-Dow-Chemical-representatives to speak live on the news, Bichlbaum

⁵ For the Yes Men’s account of all of their “hijinks,” see: <http://theyesmen.org/hijinks>

accepted the invitation. Suiting up in one of his many thrift-store *cum* corporate guises, adopting the pseudonym Jude Finisterra—appropriately invoking both the patron saint of lost causes and the end of the earth, the Yes Men effected one of their most public and perhaps most far-reaching interventions to date.⁶

In this paper, I propose to analyze this infiltration of the news-media circuit in terms of its effort to leverage humour for political ends. Given the seriousness of the events that occurred in Bhopal, it might seem as though this focus at best takes up a marginal aspect of a momentary intervention in an ongoing and complex international dispute and at worst is a frivolous meditation on an incident that made light of an immense tragedy. I argue, however, that humour is central to the Yes Men's activist orientation and that their parodic approach demonstrates the complexities that emerge when humour and a specific political agenda join forces. Ultimately, the critique that the Yes Men disrespect human tragedy is made moot through the visibility they bring to an issue and the care they take to address the absurdity of the staggering human costs that are often rendered invisible in a neoliberal market. At the same time, their humour raises interesting questions about the limits and possibilities of humour in addressing political questions.

Before coming to these questions of politics and humour, however, it is necessary to address one of the key terms in this argument: humour. The Yes Men's intervention is not one that necessarily would have provoked laughter. If any kind of affective response can be imagined in response, it would be more likely a wry smile than a hearty guffaw. So why look at this instance of impersonation, this project in culture jamming, as humorous at all? Can something that is unlikely to cause laughter be called humour at all? I argue that the answer is yes, nor am I the first to make the point. One of the first thinkers to ponder humour, in 55 BCE, Cicero writes in *De Oratore* of a certain mode of humour which he calls "equivocal wit," noting that it "is of the most cutting kind [...] but it is not very often productive of great laughter" (Cicero 1840: 191). Much more recently, anthropologist Mary Douglas cautions: "It would

⁶ To read the Yes Men's full account of the intervention, see: <http://theyesmen.org/hijinks/bbcbhopal>

be wrong to suppose that the acid test of a joke is whether it provokes laughter or not” (Douglas 1999: 148). Instead, drawing from two of the seminal works in the field of humour studies—Henri Bergson’s *Le rire* (first published 1899) and Sigmund Freud’s *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (first published in 1905)—Douglas notes that the study of humour has been centrally concerned with the *structure* of humour. Where Freud locates humour in the interplay between conscious and subconscious mind, specifically in the eruption of the latter as the former briefly relinquishes control, Bergson finds humour in instances in which the mechanical or automatic (and thus unspontaneous and unfree) takes over the human subject. Douglas deems the two theorists’ similarity an understanding of the joke “as an attack on control” (Douglas 1999: 149). In her own work, Douglas expands on these structural understandings of humour to see it as a mode that is always operant within “the total social situation” (Douglas 1999: 148). Going further, Douglas explains that what the joke offers is “play upon form” that allows for the realization that “an accepted pattern has no necessity” (Douglas 1999: 150). For Douglas, jokes are a kind of “anti-rite:” they are congruent with social patterns, but in that congruence show that those patterns that seem fixed or “natural” are in fact arbitrary and contingent. In other words, jokes, or humour, demonstrate the incongruities that underlie myths of social congruence. Simon Critchley offers a tidy summary, suggesting that humour “lets us see the familiar defamiliarized, the ordinary made extraordinary and the real rendered surreal” (Critchley 2002: 10). This theory of humour as being produced out of incongruities, whether social or psychic, maps well onto the Yes Men’s intervention on the BBC. The two often say the impetus behind their projects is to “change the world.”⁷ In other words, they seek to demonstrate that the patterns that condition social and economic structures are not inevitable or immutable—laughter, whether or not it occurs, is inessential to this humour.

Given that their project aligns so well with the function Mary Douglas assigns to joking, the Yes Men’s use of this mode in communicating is perhaps not surprising. More than this, humour is

⁷ The title of their most recent documentary *The Yes Men Fix the World* (2009) is only one instance among many where they describe their activism in terms of changing or fixing the world.

expressly tied to their oft-repeated impulse: the idea of changing the world, or revolution. A central characteristic of Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of carnival, humour is one aspect that liberates the world of carnival from the official doctrines. Or, put another way, the process of demonstrating the contingency of social patterns that Douglas assigned to joking is seen in carnival as effecting a kind of liberation for the joker and its hearer not only through the revelation of contingency but also through a reversal of established norms. Bakhtin describes the world of carnival as "a boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations" standing in opposition to the official "narrow-minded seriousness" of dominant medieval culture, as ruled by church and lords (Bakhtin 1984: 5, 3). In this effective reversal of the norms of official culture, carnival makes possible a "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth" (Bakhtin 1984: 10). In keeping with this description, Umberto Eco later goes on to make the even bolder statement that "carnival is revolution" (Eco 1984: 2). Given the centrality of humour to carnival, it is thus possible to use these theories in order to posit carnivalesque humour as revolutionary, or at least as a mode that works to reverse established social patterns. The Yes Men's work indicates an investment in this notion of humour and its liberatory or revolutionary potential. When the two describe their mission as one of changing the world,⁸ the Yes Men assume a moment of unveiling, a punchline that reveals the disjunction between the suffering of people in Bhopal and the massive profits and holdings of the multinational corporation who never publicly claimed responsibility for that suffering.

It is tempting to want to conclude an analysis of the Yes Men's use of humour here, with the corporate heads of Dow Chemical revealed as a group of neoliberal charlatans while a wide-eyed news-viewing audience looks on stunned and suddenly well-informed. However, Bakhtin makes an important distinction in his discussion of carnival—while folk humour pushes towards liberation, it is not actually liberation itself. Bakhtin describes the liberation effected through carnival as temporary (Bakhtin 1984: 10)—when carnival ends, official norms are re-entrenched. In fact, official systems of power in the Middle Ages *sanctioned* carnival, seeing

⁸ See their interview with Steve Lambert of *Bomb Magazine*.

it as a tool by which to relieve revolutionary energies in a space and time in which these would dissipate harmlessly. While the Yes Men certainly do not operate in the Middle Ages, this idea of a sanctioned form of humour raises some interesting questions in relation to their appearance on the BBC: even if we agree that the moment was informational, and I will come to the question of whether or not this is indeed so, but even if we agree that it was a teaching moment, what does it mean that this moment took place in a mediascape that is already dominated by humour, and particularly the kind of fake-news humour popularized by Jon Stewart, Steven Colbert, Bill Maher or *The Onion*? In what way does an environment that welcomes parody of all sorts and revels in the funny and ridiculous condition the message the Yes Men attempt to put forward with their impersonation of Dow Chemical?

In fact, the milieu that popularizes (and thus makes legible) the mode in which they operate troubles the Yes Men themselves. They acknowledge the difficulty of situating their work in relation to the faction of funny men who dominate the news-as-entertainment airwaves. In an interview with Steve Lambert of *Bomb Magazine*, Bonanno and Bichlbaum work to distance themselves from comedians like Sacha Baron Cohen, to whom they are often compared,⁹ while at the same time acknowledging their mutual satiric and humorous impulses. While they are understandably reluctant to characterize their work as simply pranks or hoaxes, neither is able to come up with a better term to describe the work that they do, and, more importantly to distinguish their project from that of Baron Cohen. Eventually, they admit their use of humour, but go on to try to clarify:

We're basically trying to change the world using creative techniques, trying to do something creative to make an impact in the media or in the world [...] a prank seems like something you do just for the hell of it [...] a hoax is all about fooling people and what we do isn't about fooling people—it's actually about informing them. (Lambert 2009: online)

⁹ In reviews of *The Yes Men Fix the World* (2009), *The Washington Post* said that it “out-Borats Sacha Baron Cohen,” *The Observer* wrote that it is “funnier and more useful than Sacha Baron Cohen’s Brüno,” and *Netribution* called them “the thinking person’s Sacha Baron Cohen” <<http://theyesmenfixtheworld.com/story.htm>>.

Jeremy Gilbert has noted that the task of informing a presumably uninformed public is a sometimes questionable and yet central aim activist politics sets for itself (Gilbert 2008: 206), and yet, as the interviewer notes, the Yes Men *do* fool people; their work is largely based on fooling people. In fact, the Yes Men's Bhopal response would not have been possible without fooling people: first the researchers who searched their site, then the BBC producers who invited them to speak, and finally the TV viewing audience who watched an unprecedented corporate apology unfold on the news.

To fool or not to fool? These seemingly opposing gestures can perhaps be brought together in Žižek's understanding of the comic, which he says works as a "gesture of unveiling" but one that unveils the ridiculous, or utterly null (Žižek 2007: 219). The mask assumed by the Yes Men, the parodied face of Dow Chemical, is only superficially congruent with the corporate image. The gesture is used in order to unmask the typically blank corporate face through an unlikely discourse of humanity, humility and apology. The Yes Men offer a mask to the news-watching audience—they fool them with the false face of Dow Chemical miming an apology. While the mask initially fools people, the subsequent unveiling—which was part of the whole project, for the Yes Men would have known that their apology would be unmasked as false—reveals that behind the false face of Jude Finisterra is only the unapologetic face of Dow Chemical. It is surely this moment which the Yes Men posit as the informational or pedagogic moment—the moment at which the BBC audience is confronted with the so-called truth. And, in fact, before this "prank," Dow Chemical had not offered an apology, had not officially responded to criticisms that their efforts in rehabilitating Bhopal were insultingly minor. So, in one sense, then, the Yes Men's joke did succeed in provoking a public statement from Dow Chemical, which was forced to declare that in fact it was not offering an apology, nor was it preparing to make any kind of retribution payments to Bhopal. The Yes Men, then, fool in order not to fool. They fool in an effort to inform.

However, Žižek's description of the comic goes beyond this moment of unmasking, or, rather, his gesture of exposure is more complicated than simply provoking an "a-ha" moment in the audience. The ultimate comic effect for Žižek is to remove a mask only to confront the same face behind it—think, for instance, of Richard Nixon wearing a Richard

Nixon mask (Žižek 2007: 219). While this gesture can be read as pedagogical: the removal of a false corporate mask only to reveal the corporate face as false, at the same time, the removal of a corporate mask perceived to be real could also unveil merely another kind of corporate face. Though I am not suggesting that the Yes Men are part of the corporate or mainstream media structure, their oppositional stance is not automatically read into Jude Finisterra's news-spokesman visage. In fact, the family resemblance between Jude Finisterra and Borat—a less intentionally oppositional or activist-oriented character—is close. Moreover, the more overtly satirical news-reporters that populate the *Daily Show* or the *Colbert Report* construct a crowd of would-be Jude Finisterras that obscures the act of informing in a barrage of funny-but-serious/serious-but-funny news reporting.

In order to remain optimistic about the pedagogical implications of this news media landscape, one way of reading this situation would be to view all such humour as resistant. This is precisely the stance taken by Jeffery Jones in his book *Entertaining Politics* (2005), which looks at the rise of politics as entertainment in the '90s. Jones describes the hosts of late-night political entertainment programs as “wise fools” who can safely advance “devastatingly honest [...] critiques of power” (Jones 2005: 93). The question, however, that Jones leaves unaddressed is the framework in which these “critiques of power” are received: the mass media. When, if ever, does mainstream humour become oppositional? Jones leaves unanswered the question of how these comedians leverage mainstream media networks to launch a critique of the structures of power that underlie those same networks. Recognizing this sticky spot, in his paper on the rhetorical function of comedy in Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Aloys Fleischmann offers a dual reading of laughter. On the one hand, he assigns a cynical laughter, or a powerful laughing-at that works to reinforce dominant ideologies, to the “governing elites”—it is senators and George W. Bush who laugh cynically about their position of power while “abdicating responsibility to the ‘disenfranchised’” (Fleischmann 2007: 83). On the other hand, Fleischmann concludes optimistically by suggesting that Moore leverages this cynical laughter's antithesis. The laughter of the audience at the incongruity of the leaders depicted by Moore is “‘a people's laughter’ that is driven by the seriousness of the issues presented” (Fleischmann 2007: 84). This

laughter, according to Fleischmann, refuses to disengage from the critique it puts forward (Fleischmann 2007: 84).

Indeed, Jones and Fleischmann are not alone in wanting to read Jon Stewart or Michael Moore as politically effective in their capacity to use humour to demonstrate the idiocy of those who lead the state. Our inclination is to want to read this mode as somehow revolutionary, even if its punch line is fleeting. Fleischmann concludes his paper with a discussion of the laughter of Moore's audience saying that their "laughter is an act that, in the very process of differentiating *us* from *them* must, if *even only superficially*, perform a refusal to disengage" (Fleischmann 2007: 84, last are my italics). Though he wants to conclude with a moment of critique and locate a kernel of resistance even within the fleeting moment of humour, Fleischmann founders here on at least one crux in this problem—superficiality. The humour leveraged by Moore or Stewart only superficially performs a refusal to disengage. In other words, we return to the problem Bakhtin witnessed in carnival, the problem that the moment of humorous subversion is transitory and occurs within, rather than outside, dominant structures of power. While Bakhtin concluded that this brevity marked the limits of any carnivalesque subversion, admitting that dominant structures of power were re-entrenched post-carnival, critics like Jones and Fleischmann are less willing to sacrifice this brief moment of revolutionary energy to dominant structures of power.

In fact, Jones posits humour as an "important tool of political critique" in a political climate that is increasingly characterized by absurdity (Jones 2005: 12). I would argue that, although a political climate that appears increasingly absurd seems to call for trenchant critique, in fact, absurdity makes the question and possibility of critique more complicated. It is in part the fact that a critic like Jones can lucidly describe the political situation in late capitalism as "absurd" that indicates some of the stakes in this bind around politics, resistance and humour. Useful in illuminating this seeming quandary is Žižek's description of the so-called postideological society (Žižek 1989: 28). In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Žižek writes, "in contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian, [...] cynical distance, laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally" (Žižek 1989: 28). In this description, Žižek counters Eco's belief that laughter is a liberating, anti-totalitarian force,

which, as I have argued, is repeated in criticisms like Jones' or Fleishmann's that seek to distinguish a subversive laughter stemming from mass culture. In Žižek's configuration, on the other hand, there is no either/or, no people's laughter vs. the laughter of the ruling elites—we are all in on the joke, or perhaps the joke is on all of us. Citing Marx's famous definition of ideology—"they do not know it, but they are doing it"—Žižek argues that the usual conception of ideology implies a "basic, constitutive naiveté" (Žižek 1989: 28), or a false consciousness based on our distorted representation of some other so-called social reality.¹⁰ Instead of this notion of ideology, Žižek suggests, following Peter Sloterdijk's central argument in *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1987), that in late capitalism, ideology's dominant mode is cynical, rather than naïve. In a society characterized by a cynical ideology, "the cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less insists upon the mask" (Žižek 1989: 29). Žižek thus introduces the paradox of an enlightened false consciousness, or, to rephrase Marx, an ideology in which "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it" (Žižek 1989: 29). Vital to our discussion here, Žižek notes that "cynicism is the answer of the ruling culture to [...] subversion" (Žižek 1989: 29). In other words, the critique of ideology is built into it—ideology is not meant to be taken seriously. Instead, its rule in society is not secured "by its truth value but by simple extra-ideological violence and promise of gain" (Žižek 1989: 30).

Returning to the Yes Men's joke on the BBC, we can see Žižek's subtle analysis of ideology play out. While their intervention on the BBC certainly provoked Dow Chemical to offer a public statement saying that they were not, in fact, liquidating any of their subsidiaries to reimburse the community of Bhopal, nor even offering an apology, the coverage of the so-called "hoax" in the media, once it was revealed as such, largely centered around a critique not of Dow Chemical but of the Yes Men. Once it was revealed that the Yes Men were behind the announcement,

¹⁰ Of course, this is not to say that critics after Marx and before Žižek simply proffered a theory reliant on "unmasking" ideology to show it for what it is. The Frankfurt school, for instance, offered a sophisticated analysis of the ways in which this misrecognition is built into ideology itself.

media outlets responded furiously, denouncing them as callous comedians who had given the people of Bhopal false hope in order to merely make a joke. For example, some of the headlines reporting on the incident included: “Bhopal hoax inflicts widespread damage,”¹¹ “Bhopal anguish as BBC hoaxed,”¹² “Cruel \$12B hoax on Bhopal victims and BBC.”¹³ In this media response, questions of truth are sidelined and the issue of responsibility is deflected away from Dow Chemical and towards the Yes Men. In other words, the result of the intervention was not an unveiling of the hollowness of a neoliberal system that counts fiscal costs to corporate shareholders as more valuable than human costs to the disenfranchised citizens of a medium-sized Indian city, but rather raised questions over the propriety of joking about, even if those jokes are made on behalf of, those who are already the butt of a much crueller corporate scheme. The notion that there are human costs to the increasing profitability of the American economy is a non-starter; it is not a surprise. In *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk writes that “an essential aspect of power is that it only likes to laugh at its own jokes” (Sloterdijk 1987: 103); witness, then, the media machine reconfiguring the Yes Men into its own joke, twisting their punch line back on themselves and positing them as the butt of their own joke.

In an era of enlightened false consciousness, Žižek notes, in keeping with his critique of prevalent notions of ideology, it is not enough to critique blind spots in dominant ideologies (Žižek 1989: 30). We know these blind spots to exist, and yet we insist on the mask that allows us to act as though we did not. Similarly, though in a less theoretically dense and more overtly politically-oriented argument, in his book *Anticapitalism and Culture* (2008), Jeremy Gilbert notes that the anticapitalist project can never be simply one of unmasking. Without trying to downplay the importance of informing the public on the ills perpetrated by global mega-corporations like Union Carbide, Gilbert

¹¹ Nicholas, Kate. 2004. “Bhopal Hoax inflicts widespread damage.” *PRWeek* (December 9): 20.

¹² Gedye, Robin. 2004. “Bhopal anguish as BBC hoaxed.” *The London Telegraph* (December 4): 1.

¹³ O’Neill, Sean. 2004. “Cruel \$12B Hoax on Bhopal victims and BBC.” *The Times (London)* (December 5): 3.

outlines a dominant mode among those who resist neoliberalism that amounts to what he terms a “politics of disclosure” (Gilbert 2008: 206). In other words, anticapitalist politics, he suggests, often builds its political projects around the end goal of “informing an uniformed public about the evils of capitalism” (Gilbert 2008: 206). The problem with this aim, according to Gilbert and implied by Žižek’s analysis of the subtleties of ideology, is that people *already know* about the evils of capitalism. In relation to the Yes Men, or Jon Stewart or Steven Colbert, it is not enough to say that they point out the incongruity of elected leaders and neoliberal executives; it is not enough to laugh at the system. In fact, we laugh at the system *because* we recognize the incongruity. If we did not know these jokes to reflect an already entrenched discrepancy, we would not find them funny.

Žižek’s analysis of ideology concludes that ideology is no longer fundamentally located in knowledge—since we no longer take truth claims seriously—but this does not mean ideology is a void category. Rather, Žižek locates ideology at the level of doing, or action—we do not take ideology seriously, and yet we still *act* as though we did. In relation to the Yes Men’s intervention, then, this understanding of ideology encompasses the odd fact that viewers can recognize the joke, but are also willing to deflect the punch line away from Dow Chemical, the butt of the joke, and towards the jokers—the BBC’s viewers very likely continued to live their lives as they had always done, perhaps irradiating their lawns with Dow chemicals and buying products produced by the underpaid people who today live in Bhopal. To say this differently, the TV audience recognizes the joke, but act as though they did not and in their criticism of the Yes Men’s effort, implicitly support the same neoliberal system that they just as eagerly laugh at.

At the same time, to conclude this essay solely within the downward spiral of a cynical ideology would be to concede victory to a monolithic conception of the culture industry and a view of humanity as a horde of zombies. Indeed, the Yes Men’s effort cannot be considered moot at the point of unmasking, nor is this the end of their work. It is precisely at Žižek’s level of doing that the Yes Men offer something that Jon Stewart, Steven Colbert, Bill Maher and Michael Moore do not. The difference lies in their punch line. While Moore’s films posit American leaders as contradictory and incongruous buffoons as we laugh, the Yes Men offer a different kind of punch line. While the butt of their joke is

equally corporate America, they take aim at this target by showing how something else could be done. The joke they pull at Dow Chemical's expense does not end only with a revelation-to-the-informed centred on the incongruity of corporate profit in a world of suffering, but it also demonstrates the ease with which apologies and rehabilitation can begin. The Yes Men outline a very clear, if effectively unrealistic, plan of action in order to initiate retribution: the liquidation of a subsidiary company in order to fund a recovery plan in Bhopal. Finally, the Yes Men's joke clearly illustrates the barrier to these kinds of compassionate responses to corporate misdeeds: the fiscal cost and the financial loss to shareholders.

The Yes Men's joke concludes not just with a punch line, but with an alternative. Importantly, this alternative, though rhetorical, is posited at the level of action. In this way, the Yes Men offer an eruption of what Sloterdijk might term kynical subversion in a cultural moment characterized by a prevailing cynical ideology. Though Žižek borrowed Sloterdijk's description of contemporary ideology as cynical, he did not import the other half of the duo, except to invoke it as a cadaver. Kynicism is the natal stream of modern cynicism, though it is essentially its polar opposite. Sloterdijk describes kynicism as a sort of plebeian "cheekiness," a kind of "productive aggressivity, letting fly at the enemy: 'brave, bold, lively, plucky, untamed, ardent'" (Sloterdijk 1987: 103). Under the parameters of enlightened false consciousness, Sloterdijk fears for kynicism's cheeky resistance. Though, where Žižek considers kynicism a lost vestige of a former life, Sloterdijk insists on the persistence of a kynical current in late-capitalism. In fact, writing with an eye cast backwards towards the German tragedies of the Weimar Republic and World Wars, Sloterdijk insists that kynicism remains "the life philosophy of crisis," or the mode in which liveliness can persist even in times of extreme uncertainty and precarity (Sloterdijk 1987: 124).

I want to draw attention to the link that Sloterdijk draws between kynicism and embodiment. Essentially, kynical subversion takes place at the level of the material.¹⁴ Here, the notion of kynicism offers a second

¹⁴ See Sloterdijk's delightfully named section "Pissing Against the Idealist Wind," (1987) *Critique of Cynical Reason*: 103-107.

interesting lens by which to understand the Yes Men's humour. In order to construct their spirited send-up of the hollow-men of corporate America, the Yes Men use their own bodies to enact a humorous resistance to neoliberalism. If cynical reason is characterized by an acquiescence to domination—or to put it more cautiously, “as participation in a collective, realistically attuned way of seeing things” (Sloterdijk 1987: 5)—kynical reason is the revolt of “self assertion and self-realization” (Huysen 1987: xvii). In their joke, the Yes Men literally perform another way of being, another way of living as resistant and cheeky, within a system in which conformity is the easier (and often more applauded) choice. Ultimately, the Yes Men confront a bleak situation too common under neoliberal economic models: further loss to the disenfranchised, further profit to the enfranchised, and difficulty in corralling the energy and will to address the situation, and in response dress up, take on ridiculously punning pseudonyms and perform an alternative punch line, provoking maybe a laugh, perhaps a smile, or, at the very least, a glimmer of recognition not only of the problem, but of the level on which action occurs, in which the body can speak against cynical ideology. Sloterdijk writes that those “who still want to claim to be enlighteners must be able to be so cheeky, so impudent” (Sloterdijk 1987: 127). Whether or not they change the world, the Yes Men cannot be faulted for lacking cheek or impudence in the face of what often seem to be intractable and monolithic economic, media and social structures. Their humour draws attention to the level of doing—the level on which both action *and* inaction occur as deliberate and embodied choices.

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