

Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping:
A Theatrical Quest to End Consumerism

Last Thursday night, I sat myself down in the comfort of my home to watch my favorite television show *Grey's Anatomy*. I turned on the TV, but instead of seeing Dr. Meredith Grey giving orders to the hospital interns, I saw the word “Macy’s” in big red letters, and a voice coming from the TV telling me that I could be part of “the magic of Macy’s.” That is, if I bought their new coat for \$59.99. Americans are faced with advertisements like this everyday, all promoting a certain product for us to purchase and, thus, promoting consumerism. Consumerism is advertised to people in a variety of ways in the mainstream media: through mediums such as television and film to corporate “holidays” like Black Friday. The discourse in the mainstream regarding consumerism is that it is necessary for people to purchase material goods in order to achieve happiness and self-satisfaction. A subaltern counterpublic that complicates this message is Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping, a culture-jamming group that promotes its message of anti-consumerism music, sermons, and retail interventions. In opposition to the mainstream discourse, the Church argues that consumerism is not the key to a complete life. Their message, presented in entertaining and often outrageous ways, will in no way end shopping completely; but the group’s interference in mainstream media may cause audiences to think about the negative effects of shopping.

According to Jurgen Habermas, there is a “public sphere” or “institutionalized arena of discursive interaction” in which citizens can discuss common affairs. His sphere, however, did not include the potential role of minorities and subcultures in the discussion, only focusing on the role of privileged white men. In response to this, Nancy Fraser suggests that there are “subaltern counterpublics” or “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups

invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 67). Subaltern counterpublics or SCPs promote a certain idea or movement and attempt to assert their argument to audiences of the oppositional mainstream.

One example of an SCP is an anti-consumerist culture-jamming group called the Church of Stop Shopping, led by Reverend Billy. Anti-consumerism, of course, discourages the consumption of material goods, particularly from large corporations whose purpose is primarily to make money. “Culture-jamming” is described as “an amping up of contradictory rhetorical messages in an effort to engender a qualitative change” (Harold 192). Culture-jamming groups like Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping “undermine the marketing rhetoric of multinational corporations” through “media hoaxing, corporate sabotage” and parody (Harold 190).

According to their website, the Church of Stop Shopping is a “radical performance community” whose mission is to defend “land, life and imagination from reckless development and the extractive imperatives of global capital” (revbilly.com). It claims that consumerism has only negative consequences for society, a belief that complicates the mainstream discourse, which paints consumerism in a positive light. The ways that consumerism is represented in mainstream discourse varies, but despite the chosen medium, there is often a similar underlying theme: consumerism is linked with “cool.” This theme is evident in the 1995 film *Clueless*, just one representation of the mainstream perception of consumerism. In the film, the audience follows the life of protagonist Cher, who spends most of her days hanging out with friends, talking about boys, and –most importantly –shopping. Cher is constantly shown purchasing and handling material goods (particularly clothes and accessories). In one scene, it is claimed that the

clothes Cher bought will make her “a supermodel” whom everyone else will want to “dress like” (Clueless). From this, the viewer is told that materialism will put you in a higher social position than others at which you are “the envy of them all” (Fourie 60).

The film’s reasoning for consumerism –to be cool –legitimizes consumer capitalism as a way of living for the character and for the viewer (Fourie 7). It tells people that if they want to be cool, they will have to shop. Of course, not everyone necessitates an image of cool, so mainstream discourse has other methods of justifying consumerism. A second representation of consumerism in the dominant discourse is that it is a necessary element to achieve happiness. There are a number of examples of this, one of them being Black Friday.

Black Friday refers to the day after Thanksgiving on which stores nationwide hold sales on store items. Although it is not technically a holiday, Black Friday is recognized everywhere as a day to shop. Advertisements run weeks before the date, reminding viewers to get to stores and buy material goods. Many commercials for Black Friday shopping suggest that unless you buy goods, you –or the person who a purchase is intended for –will not be happy. Billboards encourage parents to buy their clothes that “will tickle her pink!” And what if the person chooses not to buy the clothes? Then, the advertisement suggests, she will not experience happiness like she would if she were to buy the materials.

Consumerism is highly encouraged through this concept of Black Friday and most of the mainstream news that circulates it. Even news anchors remind viewers to “get out and shop.” Although this positive endorsement of consumerism is still dominant in media, groups like Reverend Billy and The Church of Stop Shopping complicate the dominant discourse through various media strategies, including music, sermons, and “retail interventions.”

The Church of Stop Shopping began in 1997 by William Talen, a stage actor. Talen, upset with the commercialization of his neighborhood in New York, started preaching to passersby in Times Square about the dangers of commodification and consumerism, how it would take over the neighborhoods and ultimately take over individuals. Talen created a new persona for himself, called Reverend Billy, and began dressing in priest's costume for his "sermons." Eventually, he formed the Church and is joined today by a gospel choir of over thirty people.

The choir has released four albums, most of them written by Talen and available to listen and download for free on their website. Each song sends a message of anti-consumerism, some with different underlying themes. In "Beatitudes of Buylessness," Talen links consumerism with heartlessness. The choir sings, "Blessed is the artist who is not corporate sponsored for you shall give birth to warm fronts of emotion and breakthroughs of Peace." The lyrics suggest that those associated with sponsors and capitalism experience no "emotion." That is, they are dehumanized by money and materials to things that cannot feel. This complicates the mainstream discourse, which suggests that material goods bring about happiness.

Several of the songs are recorded in dance mixes. This, perhaps, is a way to appeal to a younger audience. Each year, the United States spends over 15 billion dollars marketing to kids under the age of 12, and children at that age are exposed to nearly 40 hours of media exposure every week (What Would Jesus Buy?). Youth are especially susceptible to the mainstream discourse of consumerism and as a result, may be more likely to engage in consumerism. Therefore, the Church of Stop Shopping may seek to appeal to a young crowd to save them from the dangers of consumerism.

Although the Church of Stop Shopping is not technically a church, they frequently perform "sermons" to preach their message to stop shopping. The sermons –or theatrical

performances –are conducted in buildings or on the street; wherever they can draw a crowd. The choir members are typically dressed in robes, while the Reverend wears a black shirt and pants, white jacket, and (unofficial) clerical collar. In the sermons, Reverend Billy disputes the claims of the dominant discourse and tells the audience that they do not, in fact, need material goods. He said once, “The product needs you worse than you need it.” That is, we do not need material things to be complete.

A handful of Reverend Billy’s sermons are available to watch online. One look, and it is clear that dramatization and acting are principle components of the performance. From the Reverend’s platinum blonde, coiffed hair to the credit card “exorcisms” that result in his “fainting,” entertainment is key. Writer Jane Hindley attended one of these sermons and argues that while the medium kept her attention, the message is what she remembered. She says that while the “show walks a rather ambiguous line between caricature and conviction, it definitely veers on the side of conviction” (Hindley 120).

A third medium through which Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping spread their message is what they call “retail interventions.” Like the sermons, these performances fall on the line between entertainment and meaning. The Reverend executes different kinds of interventions depending on what corporation he is in. The most frequently targeted corporations are Disney and Starbucks

Perhaps his most infamous intervention was at Disneyland on Christmas Eve five years ago. The Reverend and his choir made their way through the park, yelling at people to “call onto a god that is not a product”. With a body count of over 30 and their chants echoing down Main Street USA, the group caused quite a scene. Of course, there was no shortage of theatrics on this day. The Reverend was dressed in his usual manner –a cross between Elvis Presley and an over-

enthused priest –and told park attendees that “something is wrong” with Disneyland and that “corporations stole the magic” that we “need to get back” (What Would Jesus Buy?). The Reverend was quickly arrested and his choir was forced to leave the area. This raises the questions then: was it worth it? Besides get their leader thrown in jail, did the Church of Stop Shopping accomplish anything proactive that day at Disneyland?

All of the Church’s retail interventions are dramatic and like the one at Disneyland. The group’s loud and intrusive performance no doubt has the ability “to attract media attention,” but scholar Marcyrose Chvasta argues that such “carnavalesque” protests are do not results in any immediate, significant social or governmental change (Chvasta 5). In her article on protests, she says, “silliness in the streets only goes so far as public argument” (Chvasta 6); activists are more likely to succeed if they “abandoned theatrical tactics...and focused on developing constructive relationships with political insiders and officials” (Chvasta 10).

The Reverend’s theatrical tactics in retail interventions can be intimidating to audiences who may “find the disturbance distasteful.” However, the attention that the Reverend and choir draw to themselves may spark curiosity in an audience member, who will consequently ask who they are and what they are doing (Hindley 123). As Jill Lane explains in her article on the anti-consumerist organization, the Church’s retail interventions “do not dramatize a shopping antagonism...Rather, they direct an audience’s attention to the theatricality of advertising and corporate staging, and to the underlying social logic that has governed those choices” (Lane 73). That is, the Church of Stop Shopping –as told by Reverend Billy himself –understands that “nobody can [wholly] stop shopping, but you can have a conscious about it; think about how it effects other people” (What Would Jesus Buy?). Mainstream discourse regarding consumerism does not encourage people to “have a conscious” about their shopping. Advertisements explicitly

tell people that to achieve happiness, they must “Buy now,” regardless of the potential negative effects that shopping may have.

Although this pro-consumerist discourse remains dominant, Reverend Billy and The Church of Stop Shopping have effectively interfered the mainstream discourse. In a country facing the worst economic crisis in years (maybe ever), people are more aware than ever at the implications of consumerism, and likely pay more attention to discourse in the media. The popularity of the organization has grown consistently over the last several years, as demonstrated by the budding choir and “the increasing ‘hits’ on their webpage” (McClish 5). Right now, Reverend Billy faces one year of jail time after a retail intervention at a Chase Bank got him arrested for rioting and unlawful assembly. A petition to save him from jail has over 13,000 signatures, evidence that people know the Reverend and support his message. The fact that he faces jail time shows the Reverend’s potential as a threat to corporate consumerism.

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