

Christine Harold, **OurSpace: Resisting the Corporate Control of Culture**, University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 232 pp., \$15.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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When I mentioned to one of my colleagues that I would be reviewing a book called *OurSpace*, her immediate response was, "Oh, is it about MySpace?" Such is the significance of the MySpace phenomenon in contemporary popular culture, that any two-word phrase ending with "space" connotes some connection to the (in)famous social networking site. Turns out, the book isn't so much about MySpace, but is rather a more general examination of the movements that have arisen to protest the encroachment of corporate interests onto "authentic" public spaces. Of course, MySpace is the example *par excellence* of a supposedly organic social network generally co-opted by multinational business, in this case Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. So it makes sense that Christine Harold uses it as the entry point for her study. Furthermore, given her declaration that she finds working within capitalist markets more productive than working against them, I have to give Harold credit for giving her book a title that exploits the cultural capital of the MySpace brand. The reader may pick up the book thinking *OurSpace* is about MySpace, but will come away with a deeper understanding of and perhaps sympathy for the people who resist the corporate domination of political and cultural space.

Besides not really being about MySpace, *OurSpace* is a bit of a Trojan Horse in another respect. My initial interest in reading the book was piqued by the jacket's claim that it would be an exploration and critique of the "culture jamming" movement. Having enthusiastically read works by Naomi Klein, Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, and Thomas Frank (all of whom Harold cites), I was expecting this to be a fresh look at the countercultural critique of American consumerism. In some ways, it is this; Harold devotes several chapters to rhetorical analysis of various strategies undertaken by the culture jammers and their ilk. Yet ultimately, I don't think this was Harold's central interest in undertaking this study, nor is it the book's greatest contribution to communication and cultural studies. *OurSpace* really gets going in its second half, when it engages notions of "the public" in discussing the strategies and successes of the "open source" movement.

There are a few points worth noting about the culture jamming section of the book, though. Most of all, Harold's position on countercultural resistance to consumerism is a refreshing alternative to the likes of Klein and Heath and Potter. Citing these authors' popular books (Klein's *No Logo* and Heath and Potter's *Nation of Rebels*), Harold positions herself somewhere beyond Klein's anti-corporate romanticism and Heath and Potter's acerbic denunciation of "rebel" consumers. Although Harold seems to share the same progressive politics of Klein, she finds the subversion of capitalism to be a misguided aim for the culture jamming movement. As for Heath and Potter, Harold cuts right to the quick of what is wrong with their rants about the "mythological" nature of the countercultural rebel who is used as much to promote consumption as to resist it. Rejecting Heath and Potter's conservative commitment to "authentic" political rebels (who use the state as their venue of protest, as if the state and the marketplace are clearly

distinguishable), Harold argues that the mythical rebel is no less rhetorically powerful for being a myth, and that myths may have political potential even as they are used to push products.

Having staked her own position as neither anti-capitalist nor anti-counterculture, Harold provides the reader with a three-chapter tour of various tactics employed by culture jammers. There will be no surprises here to those already familiar with the history of the Situationist International and their 21st century heirs at *Adbusters Magazine*, as well as a number of other like-minded groups, but Harold does offer the distinct perspective of the rhetorician in her discussions of the discursive techniques employed by these movements. Although solid as rhetorical criticism, these chapters do seem to be lacking in theoretical depth. Harold is at pains to apply the frameworks of several postmodern cultural theorists (most notably Deleuze's concept of the control society), but these dips into theory never come across as more than dips. One gets a glimpse of rich theoretical terrain, only to be disappointed by the superficiality of its application to the issue at hand. I suspect that this is more the fault of over-editing than a true lack of engagement with cultural theory on Harold's part, but one almost wishes the theory could have been absent altogether rather than left in as under-developed (and sometimes perplexing) tangents.

Harold really comes into her own in the fifth chapter, when she delves into the rhetorical concept of "the public" and what she sees as the most viable strategies for its preservation. Having offered her criticisms of the "saboteurs" and "pranksters" of the culture jamming movement, Harold enthusiastically moves on to those groups she sees as pursuing an "intensification" of the regulation of cultural space. Previously, Harold convincingly argued that those who attempt to subvert capitalist structures and processes and those who attempt to appropriate consumer culture for their own communicational and political projects can never truly provide alternatives to capitalist consumer culture. At this point then, Harold argues that in order to successfully preserve/produce authentic public culture, what we need is more "control" over cultural output, rather than less.

In her celebration of the open source movement (best exemplified here by Lawrence Lessig's Creative Commons project, which advocates an expansion of copy "rights"), it seems that Harold is arguing for a structural shift in the way culture is produced, based on the assumption that a change in structure would result in "better" content. The implication is that saboteurs and pranksters would be better off putting their efforts toward fostering a structure that encourages creative production, rather than just attacking the output of the current system. It's unclear, however, how the introduction of new copyrights (i.e., intensified regulation of cultural production) results in the positive production of better cultural output. Although it might be argued that the open content logic instantiates an ethos of collective creativity by "creating the conditions for invention" and "offering opportunities for circulation," it's difficult to see how an intensification of regulation *necessarily* encourages diversity or innovation in cultural production.

Even supposing, as Harold does, that the "terministic screen" offered by the open source ethos induces new and better cultural production, we still haven't settled up with the offenses of capitalist corporations. Whether one is convinced by the "intensification of regulation" argument or not (and I would guess that a fair number of the anarchists and libertarians who comprise the culture jamming movement would not be), this position fails to genuinely address the aims of the jammers whose tactics Harold

critiques. Although she acknowledges that the saboteurs, appropriators, and intensifiers each have different "postures," she stops short of recognizing that they also have different political ideologies and goals. So for example, while I agree with Harold that the *Adbusters* crowd is misguided in its wish to overturn consumer culture and that their tactics are spectacularly unsuccessful at fulfilling this wish, I think we have to take seriously that this is their goal. That is, it may not be enough to merely offer alternatives to corporate culture if the ultimate aim is to destroy corporate culture and the evils it is thought to breed. And although Harold claims that alternative cultural productions are able to "[displace] Disney's hold on the popular imagination, potentially making Disney, and brands like it, less relevant" (162), she doesn't adequately convince this reader why and how this might be so.

Whatever objections might be made to the strength of Harold's conclusions, it's undeniable that she has her finger on the pulse of an important cultural phenomenon. Countercultural movements against the corporatization of public space need to be taken seriously as an enduring presence in popular culture, if not as the source of effective political strategies. Clearly, even those who aren't active culture jammers are expressing their distaste for such corporate takeovers as the News Corp. MySpace buy. Perhaps this is one reason why Facebook is displacing MySpace as the social networking site of choice for college-aged trendsetters in the U.S. Somewhere, I'm sure Catherine Harold is delighted with Facebook's software development "Platform," which has allowed for the proliferation of member-created applications, which circulate and evolve on something like the open source model. These applications enhance the public space that is Facebook, adding value to the Facebook experience and exponentially multiplying the opportunities users have to build and deepen their communicational networks.

This reviewer's favorite app is the Visual Bookshelf, which shows that, at this moment, at least three people in the Facebook network in addition to myself are currently reading Harold's book. With any luck, after I post a link to this review on my Bookshelf, even more readers will pop up to share their own responses to *OurSpace*.