A new vocabulary for cultural-economic geography?

[contribution to a discussion of Ibert O, Hess M, Kleibert J, Müller F, and Power D (2019) Geographies of dissociation: value creation, 'dark' places, and 'missing' links. in the journal *Dialogues in Human Geography*.]

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Abstract

Ibert et al.'s (2019) paper is a welcome stimulus to, and a re-focusing on, what seem to us to be reasonably well-established problematics and debates. It seems familiar to us because of our work, since 2011, on the followthethings.com project. From this perspective, their remit for new cultural-economic geography research doesn't seem cultural enough (what about cultural geography's recent 'turn' towards creative practice?), the publications drawn upon seem unnecessarily traditional (what about geography's ongoing turn towards digital practice and 'natively digital' outputs?), and the research practices needed for the work that is outlined seem undeveloped (what can we learn about capitalism's 'dark' places and strategies of association and dissociation from, among others, creative digital practice?). Digital outputs such as followthethings.com risk being bypassed by more traditional practices of academic review, and our insistence that it should 'stand on its own' without accompanying academic papers doesn't, admittedly, help. So, in this response, we have chosen to engage with the paper's main themes and arguments by sketching out our parallel world of ongoing research in which strategies and vocabularies of dissociation feature strongly. What we conclude is that both of our projects could be seen to be working towards the same goal: to assemble a new vocabulary that is better suited for the analysis of this area of cultural economic geography. We'd like to collaborate on this with Ibert et al. (2019) and anyone else who's interested.

Figure 1. Employee visualisation appendage 'advertisement' by followthethings.com.

The provocations of commodity activism

In the summer of 2018, we published a webpage examining a scene from the Yes Men's eponymous 2001 movie. They had created a fake gatt.com website which had led to an invitation to speak at a conference on the 'Textiles of the Future' in Tampere, Finland as WTO spokespeople. During their presentation, one ripped off the other's business suit to reveal a skin tight golden 'management leisure suit' beneath. The wearer then pulled its cord to inflate its 'employee visualisation appendage' (EVA) from his crotch. Tipped with a TV monitor and some buttons, he claimed, it would allow corporate executives to monitor 'Third World' production facilities in real time, and electrocute workers who were slacking off. The audience 'listened politely, applauded, and had no questions' (Ebert, 2004 in Best et al., 2018). Viewers of the film said they 'laughed their ass off' at the scene (Di Luccio, 2013 in Best et al., 2018). Shocking, hilarious, childish, crude, cutting, filmed … it was intended to cause a stir.

      Drawing on movie reviews, YouTube comments, and many other online

sources, we pieced together the ways in which all kinds of actors described the Yes Men's prank, why and how they conceived, carried out, and made it public in their movie, and the discussions it provoked in the hall and on the screen. After reaching 'saturation point' in this research, we selected quotations from the responses we found and edited and assembled them on the page so they would read like a lively, thoughtful, quirky conversation about this scene. We offered no introduction, conclusion or overt analysis. Inspired by art and activist literatures on how best to research and convey the myriad complexities of globalisation and its uneven geographies (e.g. Farquharson & Waters 2010, Cook et al 2014), the reading of a page like this relies on an ''openness' based on the *theoretical, mental* collaboration of the reader, who must freely interpret an artistic datum, a product which has already been organized in its structural entirety (even if this structure allows for an indefinite plurality of interpretations)' (Eco 2006, 30). Once the page had been assembled, we re-created the scene in LEGO, added it to the page and posted it on @followthethings' social media channels (Figure 1: see Cook et al 2018). That's our attempt at a meme-based advertising strategy for our online research and publication.

Our EVA webpage comprises just over 9,000 words of text, including , database information and references (Best et al., 2018). It's one of 80 examples across 10 departments – from Fashion to Auto – so far researched and published on our spoof shopping website followthethings.com since it opened in 2011. That's 80 art works, activist campaigns and stunts, documentary and other movies, and other forms of cultural activism whose aim is to disturb the fetishism of commodities by bringing to audiences' attention capitalism's 'dark' places (i.e. where people make our stuff, with what pay, conditions, and agency). That's 80 examples that have catalyzed considerable online response – that's why we chose them - including multiple actors' multiply-nuanced forms of what Ibert el al. (2019) call 'dissociation'. When we have researched and published our 100th page, the plan is to stop, to analyse this dataset, to identify relations between their inspirations, tactics, responses and impacts, to write a handbook of 'follow the thing' scholar-activism, to re-design our website based on its structure, and – let's dream big – to organise festivals of 'follow the thing' scholar-activism for 'follow the thing' researchers and activists to discuss and make new work in this genre. Because 'follow the thing' research, for us at least, has morphed into this substantial experiment in critical, creative, digital geographic practice (cf Ash et al. 2018 , de Leeuw and Hawkins 2017), we do not recognise its characterisation by Ibert et al. (2019 X) as a 'strategy of revealing the 'true' story of a product' (that's too simple) nor that it 'has reached limits and arguably lost some of its potential for mobilization' (far from it). Rumours of the demise of 'follow the thing' scholar activism have been greatly exaggerated! Thinking this way is 'arguably' to the detriment of the research that Ibert et al. (2019) say is so important to pursue.

Strategies and vocabularies of dissociation
When a brand, corporation or intergovernmental organisation is targeted by filmmakers, journalists, activists, artists or others making public their alleged supply chain 'crimes', the aim is to provoke responses from corporations and the consumers of their products, to shame, persuade and/or entice them into behavioural change. That's what we are now beginning to examine more closely (see Cook et al. 2017). In the case of the Yes Men's prank, for example, the WTO's response to 'prevent [its] negative associations from becoming salient' (Ibert et al., 2019: X) was to ignore it, to refuse to add fuel (and footage) to their activist fire, hoping the news cycle would move on and it would be forgotten. By contrast, we have researched cases in which

Apple and Primark have done the opposite: banning and publicly questioning the truth of game designers' and filmmaker's critiques of working conditions in their supply chains, and inadvertently drawing more attention to these critiques as a result (Adley et al., 2013; Kemppainen et al., 2012). Then there are the more popular forms of dissociation in response to commodity activism. Let's take, for example, the followthethings.com page detailing the making, discussion and responses to Fashion Revolution Germany's vending machine that sold t-shirts supposedly made by 'Third World sweatshop' workers and presented customers with the option of paying 2 Euros to buy one or to donate the money directly to the people who had made them (Boertje et al., 2016). Some commentators critiqued this critique by asking of its makers, 'Who produced the T-shirts for this machine? Did the same person who informs about suffering people in the textile industry support their miserable situation by buying these t-shirts? Did you care about the people who made the whole electronic equipment for the vending machine? I doubt the people who produced it don't work in better condition than those in the textile industry' (Kozderka, 2015 in *ibid.*). Others reflected on the reasons for the differences between their lives and those of the t-shirts' makers, by saying things like, 'Yeah they should live better lives and be paid more, but that is a problem that can only be fixed with time. These countries need time to grow and develop just as every other country did' (Isythos, 2015 in *ibid.*). Elsewhere, we have found other strategies of dissociation including ad hominem attacks on anticapitalists' 'double standards'. One viewer's response to a movie documenting / dramatizing McDonalds' notoriously ham-fisted attempt to sue the 'McLibel Two', for example, was to say, 'This is a great video, but the guy is a hypocrite: He's mocking multinationals and – check this out! – at 2:22 in the video, he's preparing breakfast with KELLOGG'S CORN FLAKES!!!' (666ftDEEP, 2008 in Skau, 2013). There are plenty more where these came from (see Cook et al., 2017).

Each of these strategies and discourses of dissociation can be named. For those of us working in this area of cultural-economic geography, there's a vocabulary that we need to assemble to describe and help us to analyze its myriad forms and geographies. When discussing 'reactive dissociations and reputational crises', Ibert et al. (2019, X) mention corporations' **admission** of the truth (we haven't found that yet) and **whataboutism** (critics critiquing critiques for their 'incompleteness': e.g. the first vending machine response above – see also Islam 2018). To these we would add **inattention** (ignoring critiques in the hope that that they will fade in the news cycle: e.g. the WTO response above), the **Streisand effect** (corporations inadvertently keeping the work of their critics in the news by publicly challenging it: e.g. Apple, Primark and McDonald's above – see Cook et al., 2018), the **modernisation surface fallacy** ('sympathetic' critics saying capitalist development is a linear process that, sadly, some places are further along than others: e.g. the second vending machine response above – see Peet and Hartwick, 2015), and the **Mensch fallacy** (arguments that critiques made by anticapitalist critics can be dismissed if you can accuse them of hypocrisy for (inevitably) buying and using capitalist commodities: see Cook et al., 2017). This is just a sample. We have only just begun to piece this vocabulary together. It's slowly emerging online (see Cook et al., nd) and will feature strongly in the Handbook mentioned above.

An invitation

In 2013, Doreen Massey argued that attention should be paid to the common sense 'vocabulary of the economy' in order to enrich contemporary political economic critique. We imagine that Ibert et al (2019) would agree with her, and with us, on this

matter. Our main response to their paper is to suggest that we identify and assemble some new terms to add to, and mess with, this vocabulary for precisely this purpose. Us, them and anyone else who wants to get involved. How about that? Please tweet us @followthethings or email i.j.cook@exeter.ac.uk if you're interested. Thanks for reading.

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