

'Work hard, play hard': Fantasies of nihilism and hedonism between work and consumption

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abstract

This paper aims to interrogate a specific space of transgression that opens up in identity work that spans the life worlds of work and consumption, which can be seen in cultural representations and advertisements that deliberately present themselves as vulgar, sleazy, racist or sexist (or a combination). I argue that this transgressive space is constructed in opposition to the idealized images of work and consumption that shape subjectivities. I will first explore notions of work and consumption, as well as the increasing overlap between work and life. Drawing on Lacanian theory, I then argue that these seemingly rebellious counter-responses can be seen as minor transgressions that do not question but rather support an underlying fantasy of self-actualisation. Based on a reading of an empirical vignette of a specific magazine, I argue that the transgressive gesture in consuming shock media derives its *jouissance* from a temporary negation of the ego ideal of self-realisation that underlies contemporary modes of being at work and in consumption. The transgressive gesture in consuming the imagery of shock media amounts to the positing of an alternate ego ideal, which takes the shape of the cynical hipster for whom the notion of others' estimation of them is anathema. Work identities are here met with a nihilist indifference to organizational 'committed' selfhood and careerism, while 'authentic' consumer identities are interrupted by an obscene preoccupation with sleaze, hedonism and sarcastic denunciation.

Introduction

Vice is known for its raw, unsparingly honest editorial voice... Vice's editors are either totally tuned-in geniuses or prankster revisionists. Or maybe both. (The Wall Street Journal)

The first-movers of culture have embraced a continuum that includes the hip, subversive aesthetic of Vice Magazine. (New York Times Magazine)

Often so far and away the funniest print publication in the world that it's sort of embarrassing to compare anything else with it. The Vice zeitgeist is hard to define, but you know it when you see it. (Business Week)

The most arrogant people I've ever met. I want to be in business with them. (Van Toffler, President, MTV) (As quoted in Vice Magazine, 2009)

Enter *Vice Magazine*, possibly the hippest lifestyle magazine on the planet. *Vice Magazine* is a Canadian magazine that was started in 1994, which has grown to be distributed for free in 22 countries worldwide. It generally covers fashion, music, art and travel, and can be seen as a major trendsetter in terms of advertising, popular journalism and fashion aesthetics. Companies line up to advertise there and the readership are loyal and ostensibly trendsetting among their peers. But it has also actively embraced a strategy of offending and deriding what it regards as politically correct or square, both in its subject matter, its treatment and its style. These 'shock tactics' may occur on grounds of representations of violence, discrimination and stereotyping on ethnic, sexual or gender grounds, sexually suggestive or pornographic images, drug abuse, bullying or animal cruelty, among others. While controversial images or representations are in themselves nothing new, it is noteworthy that this aesthetic has become enthusiastically enlisted in corporate advertising, media coverage and online prominence of business. Photographic work such as that of Terry Richardson (a *Vice* regular) has featured in major fashion advertising campaigns, relying heavily on imagery of sexual exploitation and depravity. While the adage of 'sex sells' and the rebellious appeal of counterculture has long been applied by marketers and advertising (Frank, 1996), there is a crucial difference in the advertisements featured in *Vice*, because there is a reflexive element of provocation here. One question that arises here is what makes *Vice Magazine* alluring to its readers and its advertisers. With an edition of over 1.1 million copies worldwide, it certainly seems to be. This partly explains why corporate giants choose to associate themselves with a medium as controversial as *Vice*, but given that brands in all their immateriality are the resources of these companies, what makes it worthwhile to risk these brands on an outlet that deliberately sets out to shock and upset?

In this paper, I will argue that some salient aspects of identity and enjoyment in contemporary neoliberal capitalism can be seen in this particular case study. By turning to psychoanalytic theory, I will question the idea that the shock tactics such as those of *Vice* are efforts to call into question the status quo of contemporary norms of the social, the economic and the cultural. Rather, I will argue that it is illustrative of how temporarily overstepping social, political and

cultural codes can help to reinforce those same codes. I will suggest in this paper that this transgressive nature of *Vice* magazine provides insight into the way in which our subjectivity is caught in a fantasy that affects aspects of work, consumption, leisure time and so on. In order to further explore these issues, this paper seeks to examine a specific shared space between consumer and employee selves. I argue in this paper that subjectivity in neoliberal societies is increasingly cast within an ideal of employability, authenticity and social productivity, and the implicit socio-cultural expectations to conform give rise to transgressive counter-tendencies. The main contribution of this paper then is to link seemingly transgressive media representations and advertisements to specific subject positions produced within contemporary neoliberalism, linking to existing critiques of the subversive potential of self-transgression (Cederström and Grassman, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Glynos, 2008b). This paper highlights key elements of the ideological function of self-transgression as a hegemonic device, in terms of work, consumption and social community.

On the one hand, the ideology of consumption within contemporary capitalism is reliant on an ostensible freedom to buy what we desire, and thereby make us 'more ourselves'. In its ultimate expression, consumption not only gratifies, it provides an artifice for the emergence of an 'authentic self'. However, upon purchase of a prized commodity, our desire immediately displaces itself to another imaginary object as the original commodity then seems robbed of its mythical desirability. This is the classic ideological conception of advertising, where we fall into the spell of a marketing promise and become enamored with the immaterial value of a brand. But we can go further than this, as consumption so often manifests itself in so many other guises: besides routine mundane purchases, there is a distinct category of spontaneous and even guilty pleasures in what we buy. Here we draw secret and forbidden enjoyment from fatty foods, overindulging or whatever it is that might provide comfort at a given moment. The point is that the pleasure involved is a forbidden one, and hence in equal measures laced with guilt and scolding, if only unconsciously. This, I will argue, plays on a transgressive fantasy of obscenity, that which one would never want to embody, and relies on the 'proper' fantasmatic investment of the subject in an ethos of consumptive authenticity.

Capitalist society turns on the linkage that the commodity draws between working life and consumption. In the context of working life, there have been a number of shifts over recent years that have affected subjectivity at work. Scholars have noted an increasing internalization of control, reflected in a progressive shift from direct supervision to self-disciplinary technologies. This is exemplified in managerial vocabulary such as competence, self-development and employability, and it can be argued that the guiding beacon of identification

within this context is that of the competent and satisfied worker, who combines commitment to the organisation with a genuine sense of achievement. This identification is similarly undercut by a perverse desire to subvert and transgress it, I will argue this expresses itself (as one of many possible outlets) in strands of nihilism.

These transgressive tendencies operate on an underlying ideal of self-realisation, of attainment of some higher, deferred self. I argue that a particularly salient place in which they find their culmination is the excessive space of 'shock' media such as *Vice*. In the seemingly extra-symbolic dystopia of *Vice Magazine*, these fantasies are channeled into the alter-ego of the hipster, the degenerate, the hedonist, joined in their derisive laughter by a slew of corporate giants.

Subjectivity and consumption

Given the dominance of capitalism in contemporary society, it seems reasonable to explore the question of selfhood from the perspectives of work and consumption respectively. Even in the most basic economic instance, our need to work is informed by our consumptive needs and desires, and the need to reproduce our labour power. We work to pay for the car that takes us to work in the morning. The notion of the self is central here not just because it is continuously informed by capitalist discourses, but moreover because the concept of the free individual takes such a central place within the ideology of contemporary capitalism. The freedom to choose, whether as employee, citizen or consumer, is a lynchpin in the political and economic order. This ostensible freedom is what guarantees us a place within society, as active and willing participants and as productive members. It ensures that we buy into the system in which we find ourselves, by means of the rhetoric that we can always vote with our feet, vote with our votes or vote with our wallets. This freedom is located at the precise point of slippage between the signifier 'individual' and the subject, as we can understand it within contemporary critical social theory. From Marx's (1990) formulation of commodity fetishism onwards, the notion of the subject has been problematized to the extent that we cannot think it in terms of interiority or transcendentalism without considering the economic conditions in which it has been produced, and it is the spheres of work and consumption in which the subject is constituted as economic.

We could say that the shaping influences of media and culture are most observable to us in our everyday when we are faced with advertising. In fact, the lives we lead are invariably influenced by the consumer culture of which we are part. Advertising addresses us, and implores us to act upon what we see. A

product may appear as a clear answer to a need we never realized we had. This notion that advertisements shape our wants and desires has long been explored in critiques of advertising (Packard, 1957) and in cultural studies (Barthes, 1972), as well as in many other areas (Klein, 2000). In a classic structuralist critique, Williamson (1978) has argued that advertisements are above all instrumental in producing a system of meaning. Advertisements here are referents within a network of signifiers, and by virtue of their interrelated position, they manage to evoke a particular signification. Advertisements draw on symbolism that is at once familiar, but deployed in an unconventional manner: 'emptied structures of real knowledge are used as the frame for "ideological castles"' (Williamson, 1978: 174). In such a way, we recognise aspects in ads that are familiar to us and that aim to establish meaningful connections to chains of signifiers in which our very being is based, such as family relationships, health, social status and so on. Social myths surrounding such central aspects of our lives are referenced and symbolically linked to the image of a particular product. These social myths are indicative of human anxieties and insecurities and the excessive need for reassurance provide an opportunity for erecting an ideological artifice.

Furthering these insights, Stavrakakis (2007) argues that advertising consistently appeals on this level of emotion, and not on the level of rational choice. It rather plays on the paradoxical nature of human desire and enjoyment to attain its effects. Indeed, this can be seen in the analysis of Frank (1996), who demonstrates how from the 1950s onwards advertising techniques have started using subverting and lampooning of advertising practice itself, by painting a caricature of it as crude attempts at brainwashing. In this way, the ad can mask itself as being something else than an ad (a social commentary for example, or a satire), and in effect a critique of 'the other brands' (see also Williamson, 1978: 176-178). As Frank shows, the vocabulary and frame of reference for these 'trapdoor' ads actually derives from counter-culture and political radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In this sense, marketing techniques have incorporated the radical critiques of marketing as such into their functioning, in what may be considered a supreme ideological move: to present themselves as wholly un-ideological.

It is important to extend our understanding of how this works: ads can apparently satirise a common-sense critique of advertising itself, casting it as a crude attempt at persuading us to buy something we do not need. And in this satire of 'the other ads', it *still operates to persuade us to buy*. The quintessential example of this is the Volkswagen campaign cited by Frank and many others, which was hugely successful in its ironic treatment of the American car

industry's pseudo-innovations.¹ This use of irony has since become a staple of the marketer's repertoire. It seems then that although such self-lamproving of advertisements hardly hampers the ad's underlying intent, provided the joke is funny. Perhaps it is because the ironic distance paradoxically allows for greater willingness on the part of the addressee to listen to what is propounded.

It is not enough to say that advertising influences us – in a much more radical sense, it produces us. Our needs as we experience them are not merely informed by the spectrum of marketing devices that surrounds us, but they are created and evoked. Any notion of natural or independent consumer needs must be consistently rejected, as we find our linguistic and semiotic *frame of reference* reshaped by the symbolic interplay of advertising imagery with the wider chain of signifiers in which we as subjects find ourselves. As Stavrakakis (2007) rightly points out, Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a highly productive conceptual apparatus to interrogate this process and make sense of the way in which advertising channels human desire and enjoyment. Subjectivity can be understood as constituted within a symbolic chain of signifiers, which anchor existence in a social sense by virtue of the shared nature of language. However, this imposition of and reliance on language for the subject's being always retains a violent character, and the signifiers that come to represent the subject to others can never do so fully. That is, a modicum of subjectivity 'spills over' from the determination by the symbolic order (language), and it is in this extra-discursive remainder that the subject's desires, fantasy and enjoyment play out.

Within marketing, it is exactly this remainder that is targeted: it plays on the notion that there is something just out of our reach that will fix the situation. In drawing on familiar signifying fragments, as Williamson suggests, the ad aims to suggest something beyond the immediate connotations of the signifiers involved, by presenting an image of a particular form of enjoyment. It reiterates the idea that something is lacking and puts forward a promise of alleviating this. A car advert might stress the additional safety that the car in question will bring to its buyer, or the increased status that results from that make. If we would see the subject as a rational-choice agent, these would represent data into an informed and reasoned decision-making process. However, if we see the subject as a fundamentally desirous being, which is plagued by a sense of inadequacy or lack, we might come to a different conclusion. Here, the advertisement then becomes a vehicle for something that lies just outside our personal world. What the ad does is to link the act of consumption to this potentially riveting outside.

1 An example of this is the classic Doyle Dane Bernbach ad for Volkswagen, displaying a picture of a Beetle with the tagline 'The '51 '52 '53 '54 '55 '56 '57 '58 '59 '60 '61 Volkswagen'.

Lacan calls the relationship of the subject to such desire 'fantasy', and this concept is vital in understanding how advertising operates on us. The self *as consumer* is at once determined as lacking and as desiring subject and in its most effective form, advertising sits in this nexus between the lacking and desiring dimension. The truly fantasmatic dimension in consumption can be seen when the commodity appears to the subject as an extension of itself, as the very thing that would allow them to be *more* themselves. Consumption then not only gratifies, it provides an artifice for the emergence of an imaginary self. Consumption can here be conceived of as a way to chase a sense of completeness of oneself, and a way of sweeping under the carpet the way in which our subjectivities are indebted to the contexts we inhabit. In this sense, consumption can be seen as a fantasmatic quest for authenticity.

Another side of desire can be seen in consumption, however. Here the act of consumption does not appear to achieve anything so lofty as to bring us closer to ourselves. Here consumption is a mere escape from oneself, an enjoyment that is fleeting. Here the fantasy turns itself onto the subject in a self-destructive manner reminiscent of Freud's death drive. Rather than investing libidinally in an idealised ideal-ego, we counteract the image we aspire to by sinning against it. In such moment, we may access an illicit, forbidden enjoyment.

The point that we must take from Lacan is that neither of these two acts hits the spot. The enjoyment that the subject obtains in its encounter with the fantasy cannot live up to it to the extent that it would extinguish its desire, which must be seen as structural to the subject itself.

I will explore these two notions of consumption in more detail later on, when I turn to the role that *Vice Magazine's* aesthetic can be understood to play in contemporary society. I would like to first explore the other side of selfhood in modern capitalism, which is that of the self at work.

Subjectivity, work and life under capitalism

There has been a great deal of research into selfhood in contemporary work organisations, much of which concerns itself with the ways in which work is performed under managerial strategies of control. This is increasingly relevant, since a number of commentators have identified an ongoing shift in managerial control from structural and bureaucratic forms of control to more individualised and internalised forms. This means that the human subject has increasingly become a site of investment for power.

In the classic sociological conceptualisation, organisational control takes place within labour process, in which we find the employee with the intention of selling their labour power. It is up to the capitalist to convert this labour power into actual labour, and it is at this precise point that control of the labour process arises. From the Victorian factory settings studied by Marx to the modern open-plan office, organisational control has developed and diversified into a range of different technologies that enable and constrain the self at work. Some commentators have described part of this as a move from direct forms of supervision to more indirect forms, encompassing individualisation and interiorisation. In other words, the locus of control has moved from groups and classes of employees to individuals, and from outward forms of behaviour to the subjectivity of the employee. This has been productively conceptualised from a Foucauldian perspective by describing management practices as indebted to a managerial discursive apparatus that engenders the subject as 'human resource' and outlines instrumental coordinates for its deployment in time and space (e.g. Townley, 1994). Such ontological 'positing' of the subject not only makes people in organisations knowable and manageable but also creates an artifice for identification.

Such identification has been the object of a considerable corpus of research that draws on the notion of identity (Alvesson et al., 2008). This stream of research produced useful insights in terms of the ways in which management practices address themselves and unfold themselves to the subject. However, what has been lacking in many cases has been a conceptualisation of subjectivity in relation to the field of social and economic relations in general, and to the capitalist nature of work organisation in particular. Identities appear in organisational research both as an expression of discursive determination and resistance, but without a convincing account of where this distinction emerges. The ongoing quest for an acceptable theoretical account of structure and agency in organisations can be seen as symptomatic in this respect, including the prevalent romanticisation of resistance (Fleming, 2002).

In commenting on the increasing influx of notions of play and wellness in management ideology, Costea et al. (2005: 141) suggest that such weaving together of 'soft capitalism' with workplace control practices 'probably cannot be explained in the traditional linear terms of capitalist domination of labour' and 'will require investigations beyond traditional sociologies'. Recently, a number of accounts took up the gauntlet by starting to interrogate management practice and ideology by means of Lacan's work (Cederström and Grassman, 2008; Driver, 2009; Hoedemaekers and Keegan, 2010; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Roberts, 2005). What we see here is that it becomes possible to view the subject as caught in a signifying assemblage, which is at least in part tied together by the name of a

particular organisation. The organisation becomes a signifier that ties a particular field of signification to itself, in which the subject is signified as belonging to that field. The subject gains its meaning from its place in the symbolic structure of the organisation, where signifiers such as 'human resources', 'performance targets' or 'commitment' may work together to imbue it with a duty to dominant power relations. At the same time, the Lacanian notion of the subject leaves the door open for understanding subjective trajectories, which might take the shape of identification, fantasy, transgressive acting out or the pursuit of *jouissance* in various forms. Such a Lacanian conceptualisation allows us not just to see subjectivity as shaped by ideology, but furthermore to view subjectivity as a site for the expression of contradiction within capitalism.

In contemporary approaches to managing people at work, we see a strong focus on the qualities of the individual, and how those qualities may be utilised most efficiently by the organisation. Concepts like competences are aimed at melding together behavioural aspects, personality and attitudes with particular organisational goals. As such, they can be seen as an attempt to re-articulate the self through an organisational lens (Townley, 1994), both in way in which a subject experiences introspection and the way in which a subject may relate to others. In Lacanian terms, we might say that it represents an attempt to create a very specific Other against which a particular subject comes into being. However, this Other represented by the management ideology of the self fetishises interiority and authenticity. Conventional management theory relies on mainstream psychology for its concept of the self, and here we see that the ego is seen as paramount in much the same way as by the ego psychologists that Lacan castigated for their blinkered view of subjectivity. This psychological notion of the self is cast in largely static terms, and personal development is largely theorised through the metaphor of dormant 'potential' circumscribed by natural abilities of the individual ('personality'), and the relationship to social context represented in terms of 'attitudes', 'coping', etc. Within this ideological frame, personal development is subsequently made possible by 'commitment' or 'intrinsic motivation' for completing given work tasks with ever-greater efficiency and effectiveness. Managerial control here relies on an emotionalisation of organisational conduct, legitimised by the disciplinary discourse of psychology (Illouz, 2007).

This is embedded within a logic of self-investment, which mirrors the wider financialisation of everyday life (Martin, 2002) in that it relies on the logic of indebtedness, investment and maximisation of returns. The responsibility for this self-investment is placed with the employee, as is brought out very clearly in Cremin's (2011) account of employability. The centrality of this logic within the management of contemporary work organisation is evident from accounts such

as that of Cederström and Grassman (2008) and Fleming and Sturdy (2011) that demonstrate how some organisations have started using the idea of ‘having fun at work’ as an integral part of their organisational culture and as such their control strategies. This has been accompanied by a shift in mainstream management discourse from compliance to commitment to managerial goals. In contemporary work, it is no longer sufficient to do a job adequately or even well. One’s heart must be in it. This resonates with McGowan’s (2004) formulation of the society of enjoyment, in which the subject finds itself in a fantasmatic bind to the superegoic command to ‘Enjoy!’. The modern worker, then, seems not only to seek to work hard but also to play hard, preferably at the same time. An increasing stream of research in organisation and management studies has acknowledged the importance of desire and the ideological fantasy in the workplace (Bohm and Batta, 2010; Glynos, 2008a; Kenny and Euchler, 2012).

Summarising, we can say that control in the labour process has shifted from technologies that aim to document, catalogue and reshape employee behaviours to technologies that appear to work more directly on employees’ self-conceptions, and that increasingly rely on subjects’ desire to control their activity.

Work and life: An increasingly blurred distinction?

In order to further situate these insights into how control operates in capitalist work organisations, it is important to connect this work to wider analyses of the political economy and of the shifting nature of labour in particular. This is important not only to understand how dynamics in the labour process in work organisations are themselves articulations of broader movement in capital and its relationship to labour, but also because work is increasingly taking place beyond the scope of conventional work organisations. Some have argued that production is increasingly focused in digital and network-based infrastructures, and accordingly, products themselves can as a result best be understood as based within these contexts. Spectacular growth can be seen in IT-related sectors such as social networking and gaming, but also in sectors such as fashion, media, music, software design and advertising has caught the imagination.

Whereas much manufacturing activity and the provision of many services has increasingly been outsourced to the East, Western economies have kept a strong foothold in conceptual and design-based forms of production. This has led some observers to argue that production in the West is increasingly characterised by creative work. Florida (2003) in particular has been an influential voice in this respect. His work makes the case for a growth in what he calls the ‘creative class’, which supposedly represents an increasingly important contingent of

overwhelmingly freelance workers who are the primary motor of economic growth in Western economies. Florida is quick to link the creative class to its predominantly urban habitat and makes a case that hip, bohemian city districts provide a way of attracting and connecting these agents of creative capital.

However, Florida's optimism about the creative class is not shared by everyone. Much research has focused on the precarious nature of labour in the professions that are commonly grouped under the creative industries, and the poor standards of compensation and economic security in freelance work and contracting more generally. Huws (2010) is quick to dispel the oft-positive sheen given to creative work by emphasising that complex set of control types can operate on the creative labour process, including client paternalism and asymmetric market power, alongside more traditional forms of control such as Taylorist (output-based) and bureaucratic controls. Hesmondhalgh (2008) and Ross (2009) note the flight that the term 'creative industries' has taken, and point out that it has arisen in a variety of business and policy contexts where it has largely supported vested interests and further broader neoliberal encroachment, while the gap between the image of creative labour as cutting edge and its overwhelmingly exploitative and low-grade manifestation continues to grow.

This rather less optimistic view of creative labour can be linked to research that has sought to understand the systemic framework in which new forms of labour have emerged. Here it makes sense to look at the so-called 'immaterial labour' thesis that has broadly drawn inspiration from Italian autonomist Marxism, associated with Hardt and Negri among others. Proponents of the immaterial labour thesis have argued that contemporary labour is increasingly characterised by information-based and symbolic skills and imbued with affective qualities (Hardt and Negri, 2000), and represents the vanguard of labour in its conditioning by capital. Lazzarato argues that this growing tract of immaterial labour does nothing less than to set out to reshape the aesthetic framework through which we perceive the world around us. Immaterial labour 'produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity' (Lazzarato, 1996: 133), and can be seen as a blurring of consumption and production.

This is a point that we find in Virno (2004) as well. For Virno, the capacity for production in the immaterial sense is by definition a shared capacity, as the content of the product is inherently bound up with the social space in which it arises. Virno refers to this as the 'general intellect', the labour power of the public in an immaterial sense. Because of this bind of work with the social space, the distinction between work and non-work loses its meaning:

Labor and non-labor develop an identical form of productivity, based on the exercise of generic human faculties: language, memory, sociability, ethical and aesthetic inclinations, the capacity for abstraction and learning. From the point of view of 'what' is done and 'how' it is done, there is no substantial difference between employment and unemployment. (Virno, 2004: 103)

What unites these disparate accounts of future work in the West is the idea that it is increasingly difficult to separate work from life. For the theorists of immaterial labour, the labour that is carried out is intimately bound up with their subjectivities as it draws on the affective capacities of the workers, and demands of them that they constantly engage in the work of representation and reproduction of symbols around. This affective and communicative nature of immaterial labour is inseparable from the position that the workers have in their social context. Quite the contrary: their position in a network of social significance is *necessary* for them to re-signify the content they produce, and reflected in their emotional investment in it. The blurring of life and work is most poignantly the case where freelance labour occurs. The investedness of the creative worker here has directly economic grounds apart from the ontological conditions that make it possible. Creative workers rely heavily on their reputation within the networks in which they operate for the generation of further paid work. Creatives rely on their portfolio of previous work to acquire new jobs and they develop skills to market their abilities and carve out reputations in what is often a competitive field of work. In reviewing the literature on managing creative work, Townley et al. (2009) argue that social capital is a necessary aspect of operating as a creative worker, and that it is networks of peers rather than market or hierarchical discipline that accounts for the comparative value of one's output. We find a vivid expression of this in Arvidsson's (2007) account of 'community-based advertising' in Copenhagen, where an advertising agency cleverly (and opportunistically) enlists prominent figures in the creative underground for Volkswagen. This underground is built up of a highly stratified set of positions built on carefully built reputations, cultivated by navigating complex questions of recognition, resources and mutual support. What Arvidsson documents relentlessly in his account is the value that access to these 'ethical', homegrown networks represents to companies wishing to associate their brands with them, which operates exactly on the non-economic and non-instrumental nature of the networks in question.

But also in more conventionally organised forms of work we can find the idea that work and life are not the separate entities they were deemed to be when 'organisation men' ruled the roost. Costea et al. (2005) argue that Anglo-Saxon management has embraced what they call a Dionysian rationality that now supplements its historically restrictive character. By this the authors aim to separate out the frivolous emphasis on play, happiness and wellness that have

begun to take up an increasingly important place in managerial vogues, and understand it in relation to the traditionally authoritarian and disciplinary character of much workplace management. These aspects are increasingly deemed part of organisational life and become incorporated in the way that management seeks to sanction work and reshape worker's behaviour. In this, we can see a holistic approach to selfhood in the workplace, since the assumption underlying this incorporation of 'soft practices' into workplace management is that such self-work will ultimately lead to a more committed and therefore more productive workforce.

Ross (2005) describes in detail the context of so-called Silicon Alley in New York during the dotcom boom years, where a number of IT firms pioneered approaches to managing work that drew very deliberately on a notion of egalitarianism and creative freedom, along with rich imagery of countercultures. Ross makes it clear how at pains IT firms were to distance themselves from the traditional trappings of white-collar corporate culture. Among other things, what this did was to give employees a sense of belonging in organisations that resulted in very long hours and a strong emotional attachment to the firm brand and the social group of employees. Through extensive coaching and team building, along with the creation of designer corporate cultures, firms enabled the integration of 'serious fun' into work strongly weakened the difference between on-the-clock and off-the-clock time. And while Ross is quick to locate these management practices in the economic high tide (and tight labour market) that the dotcom boom represented, it cannot be denied that they are a clear expression of the cutting edge of workplace management and highly effective at coaxing performance out of workers.

We are, as Fisher (2008: 22) puts it, increasingly 'working from home and homing from work'. Work is now considered a necessary, potentially fulfilling and satisfying aspect of a virtuous life. While contemporary critical organisation studies have pointed out how this operates as a mode of self-disciplining that replaces more direct forms of control in the workplace, it is important to extend this notion of the blurred life/work distinction to encompass our understanding of consumption as well. Consumption is a necessary complement of labour under capitalist conditions, after all. The pursuit of satisfaction and self-affirmation, traditionally the province of consumption, can now be seen to occupy an important role in our work identities. I will contend in what follows that with the blurring of the distinction between work and life, a stronger normative pressure on our self-perception has emerged. In our endless Facebook posturing, our richly documented social lives, our holidays, our CVs and portfolio careers, we now measure ourselves against the standards of being interesting, productive and profound that transcend the work/life divide. The posturing that

we undertake for the benefit of those unknown and unknowable others privy to our exploits is nevertheless a pressure that we must at times duck away from. The obscenity and transgressiveness of *Vice* occupies this dark corner that we secretly desire, by being just outside the realm of what we might like to embody.

In search of excess: *Vice*

Above, I have outlined how consumption and production in developed economies are saturated with dynamics of identification and self-development. At the same time, such dynamics also display a paradoxical nature, in which subjects apparently undercut and sabotage them through acts of transgression. In order to explore some facets of how transgressive logics pervade the pressures of self-presentation and aspiration, I would like to look more closely at the signs, aesthetic and discursive elements of *Vice Magazine*. This magazine has clearly prided itself on its controversial nature, but it has also commanded increasingly status from the vestiges of mainstream media companies and corporations looking to address its readership via advertisements. *Vice* managed to position itself as a major trendsetting source for graphic design, art, music and so on. But more importantly for my purpose in this paper, it also appears to be at the forefront of new and exciting trends in marketing and advertising, with large cutting-edge brands such as Nike, Diesel, American Apparel and many others seemingly eager to advertise in *Vice*. The appeal of *Vice's* aesthetic has now ventured far beyond its pages, with photographers with strong *Vice* profiles such as Terry Richardson, Juergen Teller and Ryan McGinley in high demand, and producing ad campaigns for the likes of Lee, Sisley, Wrangler, Belvedere Vodka and Vivienne Westwood. Often these have drawn heavily on *Vice's* trademark elements of sex, indulgence, violence and cynicism. I will explore the most controversial themes in *Vice* briefly in the analysis section below.

We've been saying it for a few years now, but it's media kit time so here we go again: *Vice* is the coolest magazine in the world. There, we said it. But we're not just grandstanding. It's weird to have someone tell you how amazing their magazine is, but we're totally serious. We can prove it with cold, hard math. And nobody can argue with math.

Our audience is made up of, in marketing speak, 'trendsetting metropolitans aged 21-34', as witnessed by news outlets as varied as the New York Times, CNN, ABC News, Wired, Britain's The Independent, and Adbusters, among a great many others. Our editors are regularly featured online and on TV as talking heads, and our stories are obsessed over by the coolest consumers in the Americas and around the world.

What's more, *Vice* has recently been an ideal platform for brands like Nike, EA Games, Scion, HBO, Adidas, Harley Davidson, Xbox, PlayStation, Honda, Jeep,

Red Bull, Diageo, Miller Brewing, and hundreds of others to reach the highly sought-after, free-spending demographic that we speak to.

The reason? *Vice* is the first free, internationally distributed lifestyle magazine on Earth, ever. We pass out over a million copies of every issue around the world—spanning 28 countries. With simultaneous issues from Tokyo to São Paulo to New York to Berlin and back, each issue of *Vice* is being read and collected by smart and funny young people the world over every month. Plus, each edition has the latest news and opinions from people on the ground in each of our territories. What other magazine can do that? Not one.

And don't forget, *Vice* is FREE. Because it's distributed through the living, breathing fashion boutiques, bars, record stores, galleries, and cafes where our audience actually shops and socializes, every single copy of *Vice* gets picked up. That's right, a 100% pick up rate—three to four times the rate of any competitive publication. It's because of this targeted distribution that *Vice* has a global army of fanatical readers who await each new issue as fervently as if it were bottled water in the desert or something. (*Vice Magazine*, 2011: 3)

For this paper, I have analysed in depth 20 back issues of *Vice Magazine* from the years 2009-2011. In addition to this, I have drawn on two anthologies of *Vice Magazine* (*Vice*, 2006; *Vice*, 2009) In analysing these magazine issues, content analysis was applied to the articles and editorials, and a semiotic analysis was used to trace visual elements. In the semiotic analysis as well as the content analysis, special attention was paid to elements that can be considered deliberately provocative, or that glorify transgressive behaviours, or that display an aesthetic associated with illegality or rebelliousness. The purpose of this was to trace ways in which *Vice* sets out to mark itself out from a projected orthodox 'establishment', and attempts to put forward a deliberately countercultural stance.

The central questions guiding my analysis were the following:

- What are the main aesthetic objects and themes in terms of visual and narrative continuity?
- Who is addressed by these images and features?
- What is the narrative arc, and which are the most important narrative elements?
- Where editorial or authorial viewpoints are put forward, what is being advocated/denounced? And how is this argument constructed?
- Where humour is used, what forms does it take?

Images from the 20 magazines are used below in the paper to illustrate tendencies and aesthetic elements that are analysed in general terms. The space available here does not lend itself to analysing examples iteratively, which is why

I have opted to provide this more general discussion of the main themes that we can find in this publication in this period. I do not wish to claim that the images presented in this paper are representative of the whole output of *Vice Magazine*, (which does include and is increasingly moving towards serious investigative journalism) but that it is a fair sample of an aesthetic that it is well-known for and that to a large extent it has pioneered within mainstream media since the early 2000s. I would also suggest that a large part of its popularity is based on the controversial elements that I analyse below.

Analysis

Led by these questions, I have distilled a number of key themes from the content of this sample of magazines.

One major theme in *Vice* and other shock media outlets is that of outright hedonism. This appears in the form of a celebration of indulgence in intoxicating substances such as drugs and alcohol, and a proliferation of sexually gratuitous images and stories. In terms of intoxicants, features include an alcohol and drug duel between two people to see who is left standing after copious amounts of whiskey and cocaine, retrospectives of local drug haunts, boastful interviews with drug dealers, 'shrooms reunion' and plenty of coverage of drug experiences. In terms of sex, there is a strong emphasis on fashion features by Terry Richardson, who is known for incorporating the elements of pornography into his shots, as well as the exploitation and S&M-tinted nude work of art photographer Richard Kern. Journalistic features include 'Cum or Moisturizer?', 'Gays or girls? Slobbering the knob for science', and many more such explicit titles.



Figure 1: Fashion feature taken from *Vice Magazine*, 18(2): 38. Illustration of theme 1: Hedonism.

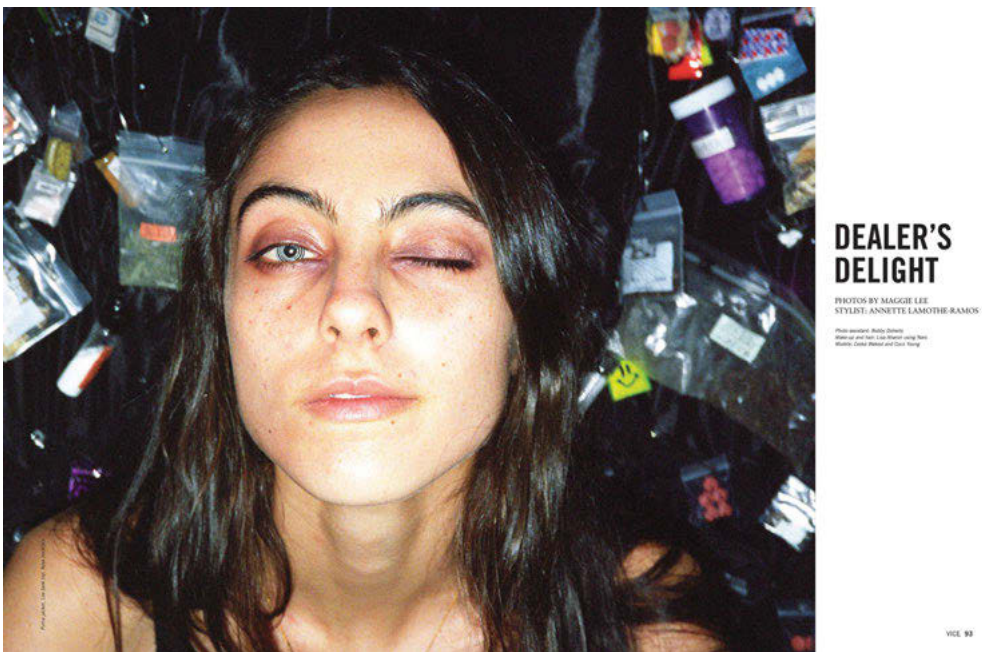


Figure 2: Fashion feature taken from *Vice Magazine*, 18(5): 47. Illustration of theme 1: Hedonism.

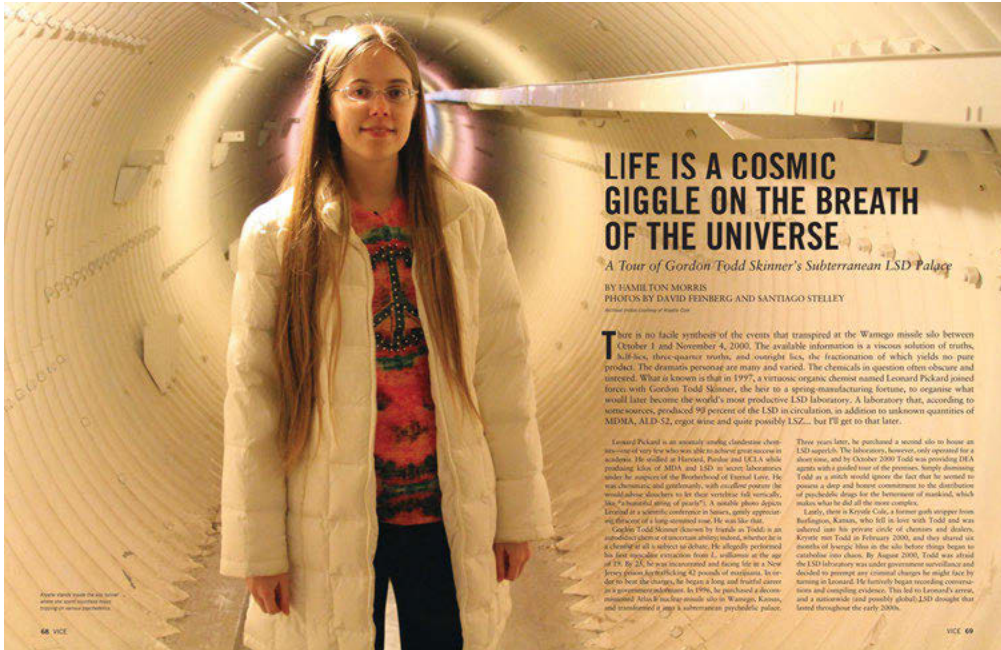


Figure 3: Article spread taken from Vice Magazine, 18(5): 35. Illustration of theme 1: Hedonism.



Figure 4: Fashion feature taken from Vice Magazine, 18(5): 50. Illustration of theme 1: Hedonism.

Furthermore, there is a particular form of celebration of violence, driven by a fascination for criminality and other manifestations of the societal underbelly from the perspective of their perpetrators. Extended interviews with drug dealers (as already mentioned) and small-time criminals are an example of this. Another way in which this is displayed in the magazine is by treating controversial subjects with a tone that is sure to cause offence, exemplified in a feature like 'One rape please (to go): I paid a male whore to rape me because I wanted to'. Prostitution also features prominently, as can be seen in 'The Vice guide to being a whore in 2004', in which questions of abuse and sexual violence are also commonly downplayed.



THERE'S NO BIZ LIKE POZBIZ

An HIV-Positive Escort Goes Deep into Berlin's Barbeck Scene

BY BARBARA DABROWSKA AND STEFAN LAUER PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPH VOVY

Despite the ongoing efforts of HIV education and safe sex, checking and plenty word-of-mouth... between food scene and sexual partners the virus is actually on the rise in Germany... The numbers of new HIV infections has doubled within the last five years according to Dr. N. H. Beckmann, head of the German STD research...

the highest concentration of MSM, an estimated 80,000, can be found in the capital. Two to 10 percent of Berlin's MSM are positive and even though the study didn't draw this much conclusion, we have an inkling it might have something to do with Berlin's thriving barbeck scene... Young gay men flock to the city dubbed 'Berlin' from all over the place, looking for acceptance...

The rate of syphilis infection in Germany has doubled within the last five years to an estimated 1,000 cases, says Dr. Beckmann. Dr. Maier says that Hepatitis C, which usually wasn't considered to be an STD in the traditional sense, has "become" an STD within the HIV-positive community, posing a serious risk during fisting and anal sex... Even since highlighting was picked up by the media in 2005, it has been surrounded by myths and distorted by newspapers who refuse to believe there are actually guys out there serious enough to do it...

Vice: How did you get into being an escort?
FUCKERVOX: Basically money issues. I'm not state welfare, which isn't a lot of money to begin with...
What was that?
I didn't. I only found out afterwards. He reacted in a very strange way and said, "It was my fault, I wanted it that way. It's not your fault."
Did you know he was negative?
I think he wanted to get closer to me that way, create more connection...
Did he do to you and tell you he was positive?
We were roller and I always stated "ask me on demand" or that crap. My profile also said I'm HIV positive, so if someone chats me up I assume they know what they're getting themselves into...

So he wanted to get infected by you?
Yes, but I told you I wasn't doing that. A couple of years later I happened to see, though. Someone was negative and I figured that...
Did you know he was negative?
I didn't. I only found out afterwards. He reacted in a very strange way and said, "It was my fault, I wanted it that way. It's not your fault."
Did you know he was negative?
I think he wanted to get closer to me that way, create more connection...
Did he do to you and tell you he was positive?
We were roller and I always stated "ask me on demand" or that crap. My profile also said I'm HIV positive, so if someone chats me up I assume they know what they're getting themselves into...

Figure 5: Article spread taken from Vice Magazine, 18(2): 20. Illustration of theme 2: Outlaws and outsiders.

DOs
BY ROB DELANEY



Hey Jaeger, wanna talk me out of this body sock and rock me with your gony cock and a crotch?



Nothing beats a look that says, "Physically I may be an Obama, but my spirit will always be in 1983 Belar!"



The coolest thing about this guy is that his awesome wife is exactly his age. He's not rocking May-December style; his wife is straight across round the clock, and that's hot.



Who likes real strength? (Everyone in the world would agree there hands.) This pretty little thing is paying it forward, with assets.



I hope our friendship lasts 75 years. Maniacs, but if you die before me, I'm turning you into a body pillow!

24 VICE

DON'Ts
BY ROB DELANEY



After a tough day of babysitting, we Yankees girls like to shake it free at Houdin's!



I'm sure that you can hack! But I'm a little nervous because this is the first time I've been at a holiday party of wood since 2004. Educate me with your gony doing!



Can Leo backed Webster on a cruise last summer and now their balls, Spunkwagon, is dating Chelsea Handler.



Fresh from the scene of a multiple production last month, Fringe the Clown wants to make you a balloon gander!



What's going on, Rocky Karwin-Nasser? Hope you don't get in a car accident tonight!

VICE 25

Figure 9: 'Dos and Don'ts' feature taken from Vice Magazine, 18(2): 36. Illustration of theme 3: Ridiculing identity politics.

But it is important that we do not simply restrict ourselves to Vice's editorial line here. Crucially, the themes described above are mirrored in the advertising that features in Vice Magazine, for brands such as Diesel, Wrangler, Crooked Tongues, Fly53 and American Apparel. In these images, we can see the same themes mirrored that we find in Vice's photographic and journalistic content.

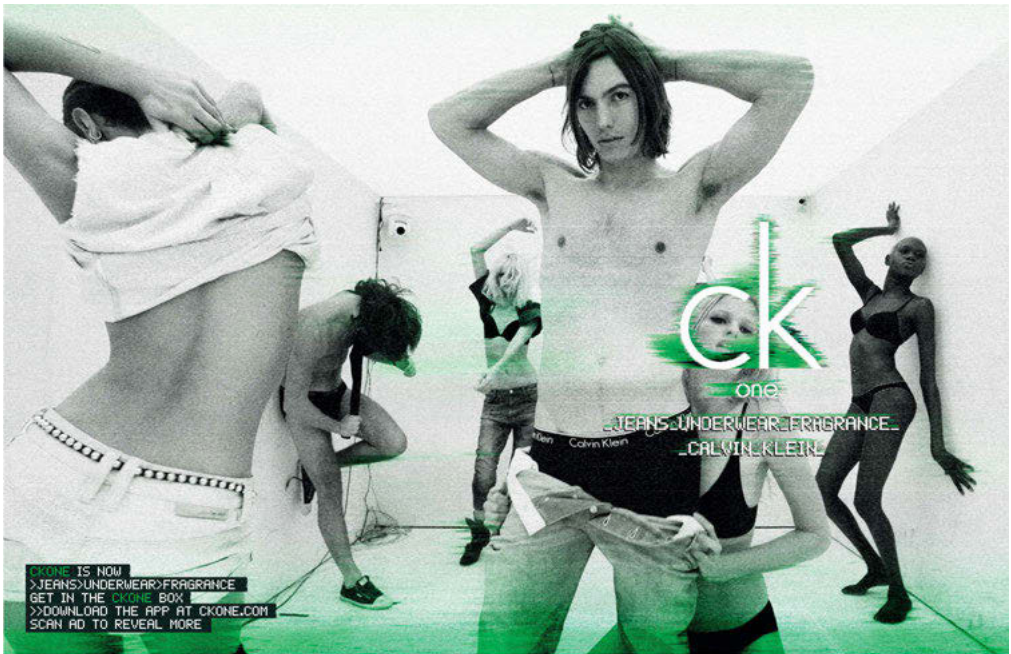


Figure 10: Advertisement in Vice Magazine, 18(4): 3. Illustration of themes 1, 2 and 3 in Vice advertising.

Rejections I've Received When Submitting Humour Pieces

BY FRANK FERRE

If you're trying to write humour, get ready for lots of rejection. And if you're ever feeling dejected, just read the below editorial rejections and think about what I went through. Don't feel bad for yourself. Emphatise with me, you selfish bastard.

Frank, this one made me chuckle. But then I realized I was thinking about another submission I read earlier. I'm going to give you this one. But if it makes you feel any better, I'm going to accept that other piece—the one that made me chuckle.

Frank, this one made me giggle. But only because it reminded me of something funny that my sister did the other day. So cute. She's only five, but her humor is highly evolved. I think I'm going to talk to her about submitting some of her stuff to us. Anyway, I'm passing on this one.

Frank, we're attached for my response. Actually, I'll save you time. It's just a "Wah" like that one. "I'm passing on this." It also has your name crossed out inside one of the Gladstone's symbols.

Frank, this one made me sneeze. Going to say no.

Frank, this one also made me sneeze, and it's starting to leak on me. It could be a coincidence, because I've had this sneezing cold. But I don't want to take any chances, so I'm passing. Thanks for the book, though.

Frank, great news! My cold is finally gone. Edie's sneeze while reviewing your submission. But I did fall asleep as I read it, dozed on my keyboard, and had to send my laptop back to the manufacturer for repair. Needless to say, I'm passing. You'll understand that I need to send you the bill for the damaged computer.

Frank, this one made me laugh, but not to the point of having an aneurysm. Keep trying.

Frank, well, after reading this submission, I'm in stitches. But only because I had an emergency appendectomy. So I can't credit you for the stitches. That would be cheating. Sorry.

Frank, you had better read this. I'm passing on this one. When an editor tells you that he just had emergency surgery to remove his appendix and also provides you with his mailing address and link to his Amazon.com wish list, well, you

send something. Frank, you send something. Being cheap is subconscious. I just wish your personality extended to your writing. You send way too many submissions. Frank, it's to the point where I actually cringe when I see your name in my inbox.

Frank, thanks for the electric skateboard from Amazon. Completely unexpected! Works like a charm. And I also love this bumper case you sent. Great stuff. Please, though, it wouldn't be ethical to accept a gift and in return publish a story I know what you're thinking: return the skateboard and publish the piece. Problem solved, right? Sorry, I used the skateboard a year already. Plus, it's been more than 30 days. So my hands are tied. Besides, I really love it and don't want to give it to you. Sorry... and thank you again.

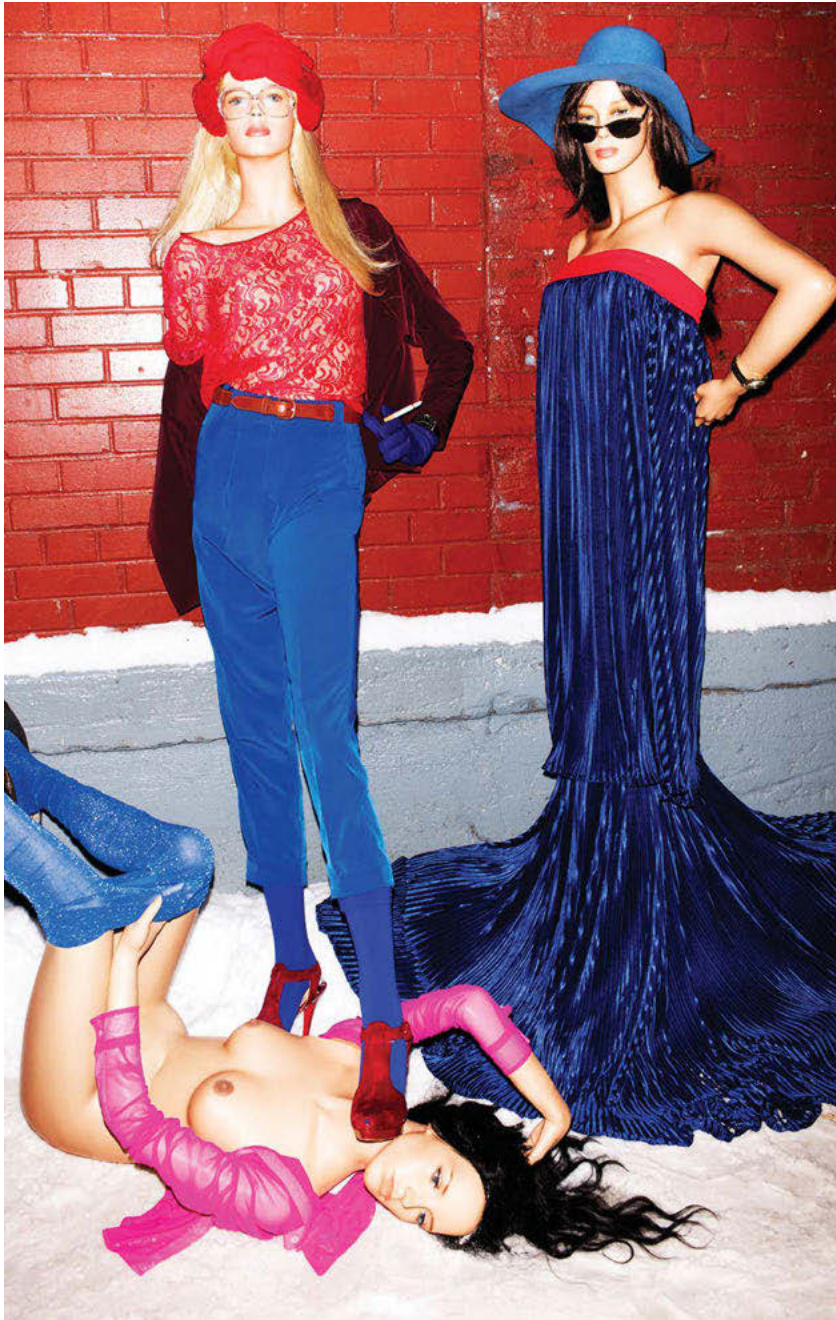
Frank, I like the concept, but it needs more jokes. A bit more jokes. Packed with funny to the point that it's going to make me laugh a moment or two. It's subconscious to compare that face flashes across the face of my girlfriend and my dog because his ears underneath his glasses. A laugh that starts incessantly enough but then turns into a scary howl—a howl so powerful that it causes me to fall and smack my head on the corner of my back, perhaps causing severe damage to my orthodontic braces, which in turn cause me to go on a recreational killing spree. Hope that helps.

Frank, no thank on my behalf, no publications for you. Read my previous advice.

Frank, great and I just liked it because people and critically-wounded those others after reading your hilarious piece. It was that funny. But just don't think it is to with the kind of humor we're looking to see right now. Sorry. But I am looking forward to your next submission. Please send it to me and read to the Department of Corrections (address below). Please know that responses will be extremely delayed (25 years in life, depending on the skills of my court-appointed attorney). ■



Figure 11: Advertisement in Vice Magazine, 17(10): 20. Illustration of themes 1, 2 and 3 in Vice advertising.



American Apparel[®]

Figure 12: Advertisement in *Vice Magazine*, 18(2): 56. Illustration of themes 1, 2 and 3 in *Vice* advertising.

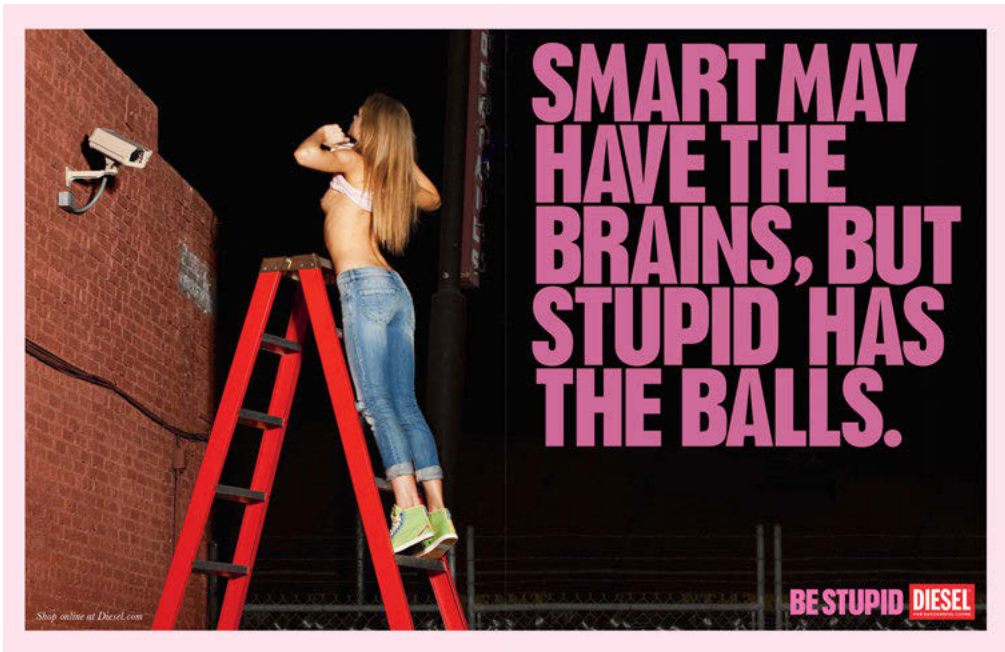


Figure 13: Advertisement in *Vice Magazine*, 17(2): 2. Illustration of themes 1, 2 and 3 in *Vice* advertising.

I think it is worth exploring why companies believe associating brands with explicit and controversial themes and images is going to further their appeal, and why *Vice* manages to command its success. The key here is not to moralise, as there is undoubtedly worthwhile journalism in the magazine and much of what it does is merely a continuation of a long history of rebellion and edginess in youth culture. It is clear that the capitalist economy, in the form of major companies applying their marketing efforts to potential customer brackets, is not only taking note of this, but also replicating the logic in these pages. The themes highlighted above show the controversial nature of *Vice*, which it heavily markets itself on, as is evident from the press kit excerpt in text box 1. From each of these themes it is apparent that they are reacting against something normative, at which their provocative stance is directed, whether taunting or playfully.²

2 Other media texts with a distinct element of social and moral rebelliousness include viral advertisements that play on controversial themes (Hoedemaekers, 2011). These viral advertisements are generally video clips that are circulated on video-sharing websites, allegedly banned from being shown on TV (which in many cases they are not). They generally aim for humorous punchlines that play on excessive sexual overtones, violence, ethnic and sexual stereotypes or animal cruelty. A similar logic may be observed in the TV programme *Jackass*, which seeks to similarly seek out and transgress limits of comportment in everyday society, combined with an excessive bodily enjoyment resulting from dangerous stunts and capers.

In reference to the first theme identified above, the hedonistic emphasis on sex and drug use, I argue that it reacts implicitly against a notion of delayed gratification as well as a dismissal of readiness for labour. Here we see that there is an exaggerated preoccupation with breaking social mores on sexual inhibitions, as well as a glorification of intoxication. In reference to the second theme, that of the obsession with societal outsiders and criminality, we can see how notions of obedience of authority, societal status and success are points of reference in constructing a seemingly dangerous, edgy counter-stance. And in reference to the third theme, the lampooning of 'political correctness' and identity politics, we can see how here a notion of the proper and the 'good life' are being overturned for cheap laughs, by turning the gaze of self-discipline upon others in a seemingly spiteful way.

The question I wish to explore is how we can understand this in terms of the dynamics of work, work/life and consumption that I have outlined already, and the crucial role that identification and desire play in this. For this purpose I will turn briefly to psychoanalytic theory to further explore this case and what significance the attraction of the *Vice* aesthetic holds for understanding the blurred boundary between work and leisure, and production and consumption. The question of how the subject is addressed is crucial to this, both in advertising and the engagement with work and leisure.

I suggest below that the very thing they rebel against is the central identification with self-actualisation that underlies consumptive and productive forms of self. Below, I will look at how this transgression can be read in *Vice*, or what the magazine itself refers to as 'much more than a way for its employees to get laid...a lifestyle, a degrading and disgusting lifestyle of sex and drugs and rock and roll and death' (Vice, 2006: back cover).

Discussion and reflections: Fantasy between work and consumption

Above, I briefly touched on the role desire plays in advertising. Here I argued that consumption can be understood to manifest itself in two ways, broadly speaking: firstly, it presents itself as an iterative search for commodities that will make us more authentic, that pertain to our sense of self, and secondly it provides a mode of escapist momentary enjoyment. These are both manifestations of what Lacan understands by desire, as I will make clear below. I also argued that the notion of the self and practices of self-disciplining have become central reference points in control strategies at work. Finally, I have argued that under the growing post-Fordist relations of production, such as those epitomised by the cultural industries, the distinction between work and life

becomes blurred, and the social context in which subjects exist becomes enlisted in immaterial labour. In what follows, I will suggest that each three of the life worlds of work, life/work and consumption are underpinned by a specific idealised image that captures elements of a subject's desire. In turn, each of these fantasmatic relationships to an ideal is transgressed in specific ways, and we can find expressions of this transgressive side of the subject's desire in *Vice*.

For Lacan, a subject is conditioned by the implicit and explicit demands of the complex social relations in which it exists, which manifest themselves in pressures and expectations placed upon us through our upbringing, our class belonging, education, the workplace, peer groups and so on. This normative dimension of the Other is located within language, in the signifiers that structure our lives and which form the 'material' for our selves. This is an asymmetrical relationship, in which the subject is constantly in anxious anticipation of what the Other wants from it. However, such a structuralist conception of the subject fails to account for the very idiosyncrasies of human existence, and it is at this point that Lacan's notion of the fantasy comes into play, so to speak. The fantasy is the subject's relation to an excluded object, something that is not and can never be part of the symbolic universe in which we as subjects live. Just outside the social limits in which we live out our lives, fraught with insecurities, anxieties and aspirations, lies what Lacan calls the object *a*, or the impossible object of the subject's desire, but equally something that intimidates the subject. This object grafts itself onto a variety of different surfaces, and so channels the desire of the subject. All this happens in the broad ideological frame provided by the fantasy, which provides a narrative coherence to the universe of the subject, and in a way makes sense of the universe that the subject occupies. In this sense, the fantasy is already flawed because it fails to fully account for the deep contradictions between the centered position we as subjects afford ourselves and the constitutive and authoritarian nature of what governs us. The fundamental gap between these is what Lacan refers to as the Real, the irreducible and intimidating lack of sense we experience in the discord between our imaginary self and the symbolic Other that defines us.

Instructive for our purposes here is Žižek's (1998) reading of the notion of the fantasy in Lacan. He suggests that the fantasy is characterised by two different dimensions. On one hand, there is the stabilising dimension of the fantasy, 'which is governed by the dream of a state without disturbances, out of reach of human depravity' (Žižek, 1998: 192). This is the fantasy that outlines the ideal, the 'beatific'. On the other hand, there is also a destabilising dimension to the fantasy, which 'encompasses all that irritates me about the Other' (1998: 192). For Žižek, these are not countervailing logics, but complementary ones. The destabilising fantasy allows for the explaining away of all inconsistencies in the

stabilising fantasy. This is an ideological operation in which a circuit of *jouissance* can function as a safety valve, in which the desirous relationship to an idealised, impossible object is interrupted. Such a momentary suspension is both enticing by virtue of its suspension of the guilt-ridden libidinal investment in the object, and the specular and bodily promise it represents in excess of the normative demands of the everyday. But as Žižek often points out, ideologically the function here is one of continuity, of 'business as usual' in which the consistency of our relation to the Other is not altered. This line of argument has been taken up by some critical scholars in organisation and management studies to point out how practices that outwardly carry the hallmarks of workplace resistance are ideologically complicit in furthering organisational control (Cederström and Grassman, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2003). As Glynos (2008b: 687) argues, 'the ideal and the enjoyment procured through transgression are co-constitutive: one sustains the other'. Examining the symbolism of *Vice Magazine* allows us to connect to such an ideological functioning of transgression in a wider sense. Here, we can reflect on transgression within the aspirational identifications of people as consumers and as members of social communities, as well as in the workplace. Here too, we can see McGowan's (2004: 124) point that '(i)n the act of *making a show* of one's indifference to the public law..., one does not gain distance from that law, but unwittingly reveals one's investment in it'.

If we think of consumption as I outlined it above, we can understand the double notion of the fantasy in its context. I argued that consumption in its more considered, desiring form is characterised by an underlying fantasy of authenticity. Here, the commodity-appearance receives the glow of the fantasy, whereby it is seen as something that will bring us closer to our real self. I.e. this car/piece of art/watch/gym membership will allow me to realise my real potential and truly reflect my true me, not to others but to me, etc. However, at the same time we catch ourselves in consumption that undercuts this, that is driven by its own illicit nature, such as unhealthy foods, overindulgence in drink, bad movies and so on. Following Žižek's distinction, we call this a destabilising fantasy of hedonism. This transgression then does not counteract but instead reinforces the strength of the Law (here the commonly held fantasy of consumption as pursuit of authenticity): the only reason I still feel like a fake is because of my transgressions, leading to guilt and a further attachment to the pursuit of authenticity. The stronger this attachment to authentic, ascetic enjoyment, the stronger the attraction of the base enjoyment of the hedonistic fantasy. Enjoyment, it seems, is never unambiguous or unproblematic for Lacan, which is why he reserves a specific concept for it, *jouissance*.

In the empirical example of *Vice*, we can see such hedonism very clearly (theme 1 above), in the way in which intoxication is celebrated and sexuality is presented

as fleeting and transactional. Here, the drive takes center-stage, where base instincts are their own justification. This clearly undercuts the figure of self that aims at authenticity, purposefulness and deeper meanings. Instead, we have fleeting flashes of pleasure, nakedly mixed with regret, embarrassment and excess. This is a readily visible part of the iconography of *Vice*, and we can see this expressed in its fashion shoots, its features and its human interest journalism. The advertisements in figures 10 to 13 illustrate this excessiveness and performative counter-dependence.

We can similarly read the realm of work through this heuristic. The stabilising fantasy here can be seen as one of employability, in which one embodies what the Other desires of them in an ongoing and self-motivated fashion, and one cultivates an intrinsically motivated attitude that inexplicably can transplant itself across tasks, jobs and contexts in a chameleon-like manner. However, apart from this utopian form, fantasy also takes a more contradictory and dystopian shape. It can imply the exact overturning of the subjective horizon in which we find ourselves. Rather than desire a promotion at work, we may indulge our desire to resist or sabotage that which the organisation wants us to achieve. Innocently, we may waste away our time surfing on the Internet when really we should be getting on with things. But it may go further, such as when we inexplicably (from the limits of our alienated subjectivity) do things to harm performance targets, team outcomes, and so on. The destabilising fantasy here takes the form of what I will call nihilism, in the sense of an absence of overarching authorities, legitimating narratives or discipline. The transgressive moment in the fantasy at work is one of conceiving oneself outside the realm of self-disciplining: to embrace skiving, slacking off, shirking, and to work to rule (the absolute minimum effort required). The real point is of course that such 'rule' to work to is in large part self-defined and internalised. Again, we see the impossibility of this fantasy, as well as its complementary role to the stabilising fantasy of employability. And if only we could be committed *enough*, we could be happy at work.

In the example of *Vice*, we see instances in which transgressive desires are expressed of this normative demand to be employable, to be what the Other wants from us. Here we see a frenzied celebration of incapacitating ourselves with intoxicants (theme 1 above), a fascination with those who operate on the fringes and in the underworld, and a rejection of the idea that 'hard work pays off' in favour of less lugubrious pursuits (theme 2 above). Satisfaction must not be delayed, it must be instant. To pursue such an illicit scenario does not stop us from turning up for work on Monday morning – a process of 'blowing off steam' never hurt anybody, we work hard and play hard. Skiving here takes the shape of

indulging (physically or not) in mind-altering activities, in unfettered enjoyment that does nothing to makes us more self-actualised workers.

When we read the conditions of work/life and immaterial labour through this prism of the dual fantasy, we can venture that there is a fantasy of virtuosity that underlies it. Virtuosity here appears as a flawless capacity for immaterial production, for resymbolisation and informational aptitude in social production. This virtuosity, for Virno (2004), is characteristic of the post-Fordist worker/subject. This virtuosity is first and foremost located in language, which envelops the social context in which immaterial value is produced. In the context of cultural industries producing intellectual property through software, media and social networking, to name but a few, the notion of a circumscribed end product, a clear labour process and a separable set of tasks fades to the background. Here the ideal becomes one of virtuosity, of responding with fluency, sensitivity and skills to the efforts of others, in perfect harmony with the wider social context. The virtuoso creates social significance above all else, is attuned and well-connected. Such is the stabilising fantasy here, and when one is on social media, such a fantasy is readily recognisable. At the same time, we can see a destabilising transgressive fantasy that perturbs this ideal. Here we find the figure of the cynic, who desires distance from the social laboratory, aiming to remove himself from the scene. This is the hipster who cannot but offer disparaging judgment on those who try to belong. At the same time, we can recognise the parasitic nature of this very tendency as it is only by belonging to a given social context that we can even take up a cynical stance, as is typified by the paradoxical sameness of the figure of the hipster to all others who wear the same trousers, the same ironic moustache and the same knitted jumper.

In the example of *Vice*, we can see in the theme of ridiculing identity politics (theme 3 above) the spitefulness with which the social fabric is attacked, as well as the ironic celebration of criminality and *outré* figures that seeks to suspend the relation that we have to those around us and the social mores and norms that stabilise this. The *Vice* Do and Don'ts are an example of such scorn, as is the unlikely celebration of underworld figures that we find in the magazine. The communal social laboratory is here an object of derision, and within a transgressive moment we can gleefully overstep the mutuality upon which we otherwise rely.

We can now put these ideas together. What we find here is precisely the transgression of the overarching fantasy that structures contemporary employee and consumer identities, that of self-realisation. Within a particular strand of contemporary media, the carefully crafted self that is embodied by the careerist or the authentic consumer is overturned by providing a cynical discourse in

which the 'legit' self has no place, and indeed is symbolically ousted. Here, the employee is ridiculed for their obedience, the immaterial worker for their posturing, and the consumer for their naivety. It is at this precise point that we can begin to understand the very particular forms of media and advertisement that manage to portray themselves as avant-garde and edgy. This serves to underline the integration that these forms of media have within contemporary capitalist practice, and more importantly the appeal that professional marketers believe they have on positive brand association. Within the spectrum of *Vice* and other media like it, the narcissistic attachment to a self-image that embodies authenticity is suspended, and is channeled into a disruptive fantasy of obscenity. In consumption, the self that emerges emphasises the excessive aspects. It aims to intoxicate itself, to binge on what it takes in. Obscenity appears here as a perverse desire to embody elements that have no relationship to the image of the 'authentic consumer'. The disjointed pleasures of hedonistic sex and drug use are placed against those elements of consumption that aim to supplement our purportedly virtuous and coherent self-image, an image that moreover complements our worker-selves. And with respect to work, the ideal-image of the employee who balances excellent performance with professional and spiritual development is equally suspended. Here, we see the figure of the criminal emerge, he who enjoys without bounds and escapes the rules by which those who work in pedestrian jobs must abide. Or alternatively, we see here the celebration of the party animal/underachiever, or even of the addict, whose life appears as unmediated by the normative demands of capitalist work organisation, or the mores of a virtuous life.

Within the realm of controversial publications such as *Vice*, the pursuit of status, competence and authenticity is overturned, as the central celebrated figure here is no longer the yuppie who plays hard and works hard. Instead, we see that this figure is mercilessly derided, and a space of negative identification emerges. The hero in forums like *Vice* is the underachiever, the hipster or the degenerate, but they are only unified in their rebellion. The gesture of transgressing the pressures of socio-economically sanctioned normality is what makes it possible for such alteregos to coexist. Through the dystopian fantasy, work becomes meaningless, social networks become pathetic posturing and consumption becomes sleazy. Within this act of transgression, the seamless complement for the ideology of self-actualisation emerges. We know very well what we are doing, and still we are doing it (cf. Žižek, 1989, paraphrasing Sloterdijk, 1984).

Production and consumption constitutes us as subjects, and it provides a linguistic and semiotic infrastructure through which we can experience the world. Therefore, examining them is not merely an aspect of the world we live, but more radically it is an aspect of a shared being within contemporary

neoliberal society. The genre of ‘shock media’ that is examined through *Vice* in this paper manifests itself as something that is formulated *against* the internalised demands of the everyday. It is also evident that this *against* evokes a palpable level of *jouissance*, judging from the explosive popularity of these media. To understand what is the target of this transgressive gesture leads us to examine something widely shared that underlies a shared aspect of being. It is all the more relevant because the *jouissance* of the ‘shock’ transgression is tied so successfully into capitalist production (both in its material and in its ideological sense).

But this integration of transgressive logics into capitalist production is also at the same time potentially explosive. By analysing the appeal of these transgressive channels, which we saw in *Vice*’s appeal, we are tracing the circuits of *jouissance* that the subject is enticed into, and that it ultimately receives its consistency from. This lays bare the paradoxical construction of contemporary subjectivity, in terms of its reproduction within consumption and work. The ideological fantasy is crucially split into opposites, and for that reason constantly evolving. There are a number of observations we could make on this basis. Among other things, this highlights how seemingly critical or rebellious moves can in fact be strengthening the status quo. But at the same time, the balance between such opposites in the libido is volatile, and a desirous relation to those elements which stand in transgressive relation with the status quo provides potential for more sustained (rather than momentary) action against the fantasy of self-actualisation.

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