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Hiding in Delight: Transgression, Irony And the Edge of Vice

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HIDING IN DELIGHT: TRANSGRESSION, IRONY AND THE EDGE OF *VICE*

by

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Bachelor of Arts in History and Psychology, 1998

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A thesis submitted to

Ryerson University and York University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

In the Programme of Communication and Culture

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ABSTRACT

This study examines a Montreal-based underground magazine and its use of “edge” as a strategy of retaining subcultural capital and limiting its readership, thus creating a narrow but profitable niche market that extends Thomas Frank’s work on rebel consumption. *Vice*, through its content, tone and business strategies, unites a series of diverse but related issues including subculture, transgression, cultural intermediaries, the political economy of magazines, the audience commodity, the politics of pleasure and how media texts constitute audiences as consuming subjects. Through a combination of interlocking discursive and aesthetic strategies that involve transgression and irony, *Vice* is able to minimize aspects of the audience commodity as described by Dallas Smythe while foregrounding its subcultural capital. In this way, it is able to convert subcultural capital into economic capital while remaining a relevant and authentic underground publication.

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Acknowledgements	4
Chapter One: Introduction	7
History of Vice.....	8
Research Questions	10
Thesis Outline	13
Other Considerations.....	14
Chapter Two: Literature Review	16
Subculture	17
Subcultural Capital.....	20
Political Economy of Magazines	24
Audience Commodity.....	28
Cultural Intermediaries.....	30
Rebel Consumption	33
The Vice Niche	37
Edge.....	41
Transgression	43
Conclusion	48
Chapter Three: Methodology	50
Intro	50
Methodological Considerations	51
Theoretical Considerations	60
General Considerations	66

Conclusion	68
Chapter Four: Textual Strategies	69
Intro	69
Retaining Subcultural Capital Through Disclosure	70
Disclosing the Political Economy of Magazines	72
Irony and (sub)cultural competencies	78
Irony and “The World upside Down”	83
The Politics of Delight	90
Conclusion	101
Chapter Five: Visualizing Transgression	103
Intro	103
Anti-Fashion Spreads	104
Reinforcing Transgression.....	111
Vice Pictures	118
Disgust.....	123
Conclusion	126
Conclusion	128
Appendices	134
References	158

Chapter One: Introduction

“An Interview With God” is the first *Vice* article I remember reading, a humour piece published in the April 1997 issue (vol. 4 no. 3). Partway through the short Q&A, interviewer Christi Bradnox asks God what happened to a toy car she lost when she was six-years-old. God, being omnipotent, explains that “You dropped it behind the couch at Kevin Jessup’s house on January 4, 1976 where it stayed for eight years. On March 3, 1984, Kevin’s sister was the only one living at the house and she threw it out during a spring cleaning. I could go get it right now if I wanted” (p. 15). The article’s mixture of cleverness, irreverence and stupidity made me laugh and I became a semi-regular reader of *Vice* shortly thereafter. Despite its overheated denouncements of political correctness, its sexism, its use (and abuse) of irony, its unsettling depictions of the developmentally disabled and the mentally ill, and its deployment of “post-modern race irony,” I continued to read the magazine (vol. 11 no. 10, p. 40). For all its taboo-breaking and transgressive posturing, *Vice* also published gutsy investigative journalism and unsettling personal essays that could not be found elsewhere. Isolating the problematic, disquieting and disgusting aspects of *Vice* is easy: photographs of public urination (vol. 7 no. 6), clothing advertisements featuring porn stars (vol. 5 no. 10; vol. 6 no. 1; vol. 6 no. 4), articles about extreme pornography (vol. 7 no. 8), an interview with a pedophile (vol. 6 no. 7), a review of a NAMBLA Bulletin (vol. 9 no. 1), images of people vomiting (vol. 9 no. 4) and random acts of depravity documented with Polaroids (vol. 8 no. 10). Yet articulating a thorough, satisfying critique is much trickier.

History of Vice

Vice was founded in Montreal in 1994 by Suroosh Alvi, Gavin McInnes and Shane Smith. It began as an irregularly published free newsprint monthly called *Voice of Montreal* that borrowed heavily, in both content and style, from contemporary alternative press conventions. *Voice of Montreal* featured articles about blaxploitation films, prison life, punk rock, cult filmmakers and emerging hip-hop artists, offering an anarchic and confrontational approach to music, pop culture, religion and politics. The magazine was called *Voice of Montreal* from October 1994 until October 1995, when the three co-founders purchased the paper from their Haitian publishers and renamed it *Voice*. In September of 1996 the magazine was renamed *Vice* to avoid any legal challenges from the former publishers of *Voice of Montreal*. At the same time, the magazine began to be distributed outside Montreal. In October of 1998, the magazine abandoned its tabloid newsprint format and switched to a letter-sized magazine format with colour glossy paper stock.

In the fall of 1998 the magazine began increasing its distribution throughout North America and launched a national edition in Canada. In the fall of 1998, *Vice* received significant investment from Internet entrepreneur Richard Szalwinski, founder of Behaviour Publishing and Normal Networks. This allowed the magazine to move its main operations to an office in New York and increase American distribution. Szalwinski (through Normal Networks) would go on to invest between \$5 to \$6 million in the magazine, *Vice* stores, online retail and other related brand extensions. By May of 2000, the dot-com economy began to weaken and funding from Normal Networks was abruptly cut off. After assuming a portion of the debt, buying the magazine back from Szalwinski

and relocating their office from Manhattan to Brooklyn, the three *Vice* founders were able to restructure the company successfully over the next two years.

In a competitive and unforgiving industry, *Vice* remains extremely profitable. In January of 2003, a full-page colour ad in *Vice* cost \$6,517 and Ann Meredith Brown (2003), writing in *Masthead* magazine observes that “At full ratecard prices, *Vice* now makes around \$350,000 per issue” (p. 10). By the spring of 2005, the magazine was generating “\$500,000 in ad revenue per issue for its United States and Canadian editions and another \$450,000 internationally, or \$17.5 million annually” (Stableford, 2005, p. 37). *Vice* is the only Canadian magazine in history to move beyond its borders and experience this level of financial success. Part of the reason for its success, and something that distinguishes *Vice* from most other magazines, is its ability to exploit a variety of revenue streams. According to Dylan Stableford (2005), writing in *Folio* magazine, “McInnes says the retail shops generate about seven percent of *Vice*’s annual revenues, book publishing eight percent, film and TV projects ten percent, record label twenty percent and the rest (forty-five percent) by the magazine” (p. 37). And as Jon Fine (2005), writing in *Business Week*, points out, “*Vice* is comfortable enough with modern media and marketing to leverage its cachet into a multi-tentacled business play” (p. 26).

As of December 2005, there were *Vice* offices and editions originating from New York, Montreal/Toronto, London, Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia, Italy, Germany and Japan. In a response to a letter published in vol. 10 no. 2, the magazine’s editor observes that, “*Vice*’s primary audience is girls 19-25 and boys 25-30” (p. 32). The *Vice* empire also includes a vibrant and well-trafficked website (www.viceland.com), a record label (Vice Records), a handful of clothing stores in Canada and the United States, two

anthologies, a consulting company called addVice Marketing and various movie and television projects in development. The magazine remains free.

Research Questions

Since my initial exposure to *Vice* in April of 1997, the magazine has transformed from a 36-page, mostly black and white newsprint monthly into a full-colour, 130-page glossy magazine. As of this writing, *Vice* has not received sustained academic consideration, even though its singular combination of cultural and economic circumstances makes it worthy of analysis. As my brief history of *Vice* demonstrates, the co-founders of the magazine have been able to elide the contradiction between the underground content of the magazine and the generation of profit. Put another way, the term “selling out” hinges on the notion that there is an inverse relationship between economic success and countercultural credibility or authenticity. Sarah Thornton (1996) gives name to countercultural credibility with her term “subcultural capital,” a phrase that extends Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital. Thornton argues that having the right haircut and listening to the right music can not only bestow status, but help secure certain jobs. In doing so, Thornton demonstrates the convertibility of subcultural capital into economic capital. The central question of this thesis, then, involves determining how the co-founders of *Vice* have obtained and retained the subcultural capital necessary to publish a successful underground magazine. This raises another, related question: how are the co-founders of *Vice* able to convert subcultural capital into economic capital through the publication of a free magazine?

Answering the convertibility question requires a combination of theoretical approaches. I use the phrase (sub)cultural competencies to help conceptualize how *Vice* readers come to acquire and maintain a suitable level of subcultural knowledge. My phrase takes Bourdieu's notion of cultural competence and augments it through the work of Regina Lewis, who uses the term subcultural competencies to describe how a marginalized group finds pleasure in a mainstream text. In my usage, (sub)cultural competencies describe the codes and attitudes a member of a subculture requires to correctly interpret a related subcultural communication such as *Vice*. Crucial to the concept of (sub)cultural competencies is the pleasure that comes from exercising these competencies. *Vice* also relies upon irony, another component of (sub)cultural competencies. As Linda Hutcheon argues, irony is by nature exclusionary, dividing audiences into those who "get" irony and those who don't. In the same way, the exercise of (sub)cultural competencies derives some of its pleasure from the knowledge that others lack such competencies. In order to explain how *Vice* profits from subcultural capital, I use Dallas Smythe's theory of the audience as commodity, which argues that audiences labour and constitute themselves as particular demographic and consumer clusters through cultural products such as television or magazines. Smythe describes such content as the "free lunch" that keeps viewers receptive and attentive to advertising. *Vice* offers two free lunches: the magazine itself, and the pleasure of exercising (sub)cultural competencies. This helps explain why readers return to the magazine, and in so doing, how they willingly labour to constitute themselves as a niche youth market. The combination of (sub)cultural competencies and Smythe's audience as commodity helps explain how subcultural capital can be converted into profit.

The retention of subcultural capital by *Vice*, meanwhile, is accomplished through a series of interlocking strategies that minimize the degree to which readers of the magazine are made aware of their being constituted as consuming subjects. For example, *Vice* discloses to readers the political economy of magazine publishing, explaining how mainstream publications utilize subscriptions and Reader's Polls. This disclosure helps reassure readers that because they are aware of these mechanisms of commodification they are somehow exempt from their effects. *Vice* also uses "the reveal" – a related technique of self-reflexivity – to retain subcultural capital. "The reveal" refers to the cinematic technique of a dramatic unmasking of a plot twist or secret that changes all the information that came before it. By appearing to address reader complaints in an open manner, and by enfolding some of these critiques into the narrative of the magazine, *Vice* uses "the reveal" to broach various subcultural contradictions.

Through shocking and transgressive imagery in "Vice Fashion," a monthly fashion spread, *Vice* minimizes the consumerist aspects of a section of the magazine that by design encourages clothing labels to advertise in the magazine. *Vice* also reinforces the transgressive nature of images in "Vice Pictures" and the annual "Photo Issue" by informing readers of the economic penalties incurred by advertiser boycotts. The use of transgressive and shocking imagery in *Vice*'s "anti-fashion spreads," along with the use of disgusting photographs is meant not only to distract readers from the labour they perform in shaping themselves into an audience commodity, but to limit the population of both readers and advertisers. I focus on transgression because *Vice*'s content and strategies both confirm and challenge theories of rebel consumption as described by Thomas Frank. Although Frank provides a convincing explanation of how transgression

and rebellion can be recuperated by capitalism, his work does not anticipate *Vice*'s experience with unprofitable transgression. In order to extend the work Frank, I use the notion of "edge" as theorized by Michael Curtin & Thomas Streeter to explain how *Vice* intentionally restricts its audience and advertisers through the use of polarizing content.

At the same time that I explore the strategies *Vice* uses to retain and profit from subcultural capital, I also consider the politics of *Vice*. I will be guided by the metaphor of "hiding in delight" – a phrase that combines Dick Hebdige's writing on subculture, surveillance and pleasure. Through its limited circulation, *Vice* hides through physical scarcity, while the indeterminacy of *Vice*'s irony provides the co-founders of the magazine with a discursive hiding space. And through an exploration of *Vice*'s politics of delight, I will consider the limitations of pleasure and the intrinsically subversive nature of subcultures.

Thesis Outline

Following this introduction, Chapter Two consists of a literature review that summarizes relevant research on subcultural theory, subcultural capital, the political economy of magazines, the audience commodity, cultural intermediaries, theories of rebel consumption, edge and transgression. In Chapter Three I detail my methodological approaches through Michel Foucault's discursive formation and Norman Fairclough's system of critical discourse analysis. I also consider Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model in relation to hegemony, and incorporate Alan Sekula's approaches to photographic discourse. This chapter also provides the theoretical framework of my thesis, where I explain and defend the metaphor of "hiding in delight." Chapter Four

examines the discursive strategies *Vice* uses to retain subcultural capital, including disclosure, “the reveal,” irony, along with the politics of delight. Chapter Five examines the magazine’s use of visual transgression in their “anti-fashion spreads” and “anti-photographs” and how these images correspond to the consumer gaze as theorized by Susan Sontag. I also consider the concept of “depthlessness” and provide examples of how *Vice* reinforces the extent of its transgressive imagery through financial penalties. In my conclusion, I revisit how *Vice* is able to resolve its many contradictions and I discuss future areas of research.

Other Considerations

Although this introduction highlights *Vice*’s profitability, it would be a mistake to view the forthcoming analysis as predictable exploration of how an underground publication profitably co-opted the vitalism of a variety of music and fashion subcultures, thereby commodifying youth culture. My research demonstrates that *Vice*’s co-founders have spent years experimenting with fashion spreads, photography, strategies of transparency and transgression. In *Punk Productions*, Stacey Thompson (2004) explores punk rock’s conflicted relationship with the commodity, arguing that, “If analysis becomes nothing more than tracking cultural phenomena from birth to their ineluctable commodification and recuperation by capitalism, then that hermeneutic produces little more than repetitions of the same narrative: capitalism wins again. Sooner or later, everything becomes commodified. Give up now” (p. 77). As my analysis will demonstrate, commodification and recuperation are unpredictable and dynamic processes and *Vice*’s co-founders, unlike God, are not omnipotent. It is in the negotiations and

unexpected setbacks faced by *Vice* where the most relevant insights reside. It is, to borrow a familiar turn of phrase, the journey of *Vice*, not its final destination that provides the greatest analytic value. For anyone reading *Vice* during the mid-1990s, the idea that the magazine would eventually transform into a world-wide, multi-million dollar brand was anything but obvious. This thesis attempts to explain how *Vice* managed to achieve financial success, and the political, economic and cultural implications of their path to subcultural domination.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review begins with a summary of subcultural theories, including subcultural capital and post-subculturalist thought. I start with the foundational research into spectacular subcultures produced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies before considering the post-subculture work of David Muggleton, who argues for a shift away from semiotics and toward ethnography. Research into the nature of subcultures demonstrates how resistance and style has been deployed and theorized during the past 40 years, and is relevant given that *Vice* poaches symbolic content from a variety of subcultures. In her related discussion of subcultural capital, Sarah Thornton extends the work of Pierre Bourdieu and helps to explain how *Vice* maintains currency and relevance with readers. *Vice*'s success also demonstrates the convertibility of subcultural capital into economic capital.

Following my discussion of subculture, I consider research into the political economy of magazines in North America, including work by Andre Schiffrin, Gloria Steinem, Imre Szeman and Ben Bagdikian. Because *Vice* makes specific reference to the political economy of magazines within its pages, I will compare *Vice*'s claims of editorial freedom to the economic structure of the magazine industry (particularly its reliance on advertising revenue). Political economy research also relates to *Vice*'s strategy of transparency, which involves making explicit references to the mechanics of magazine distribution and reader demographics. Although *Vice* discloses some aspects of the magazine industry to its readers, other crucial aspects of audience formation remain obscured. Dallas Smythe's work on the audience as commodity provides another political economy approach to how *Vice* influences its audience. Finally, Pierre Bourdieu's

concept of cultural intermediaries will help better isolate the political agency of the co-founders of *Vice*.

After a consideration of relevant political economy literature, I summarize research on rebel consumption and the commodification of dissent, including work by Fredric Jameson and Daniel Bell. I draw heavily upon the work of Thomas Frank and his theories regarding the commodification of rebellion. However, *Vice* frustrates certain aspects of Frank's theories since the co-founders prevent certain companies from advertising in the magazine and not every transgression in *Vice* is financially recuperable. Thus, the concept of "edge" as described by Curtin & Streeter is required to better explain the purpose of transgression in *Vice*. Edge also provides a bridge between Frank and theories of transgression. I conclude this literature review with Georges Bataille, Ross Chambers and James C. Scott in order to define and situate the textual and visual transgression in *Vice*.

Subculture

Phil Cohen, in a working paper about Skinheads and Mods first published by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in 1972, argues that "the latent function of subculture is this: to express and resolve, albeit 'magically,' the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture" (2005, p. 89). The contradiction to which Cohen (2005) refers involves the conflict between working-class Puritanism, and the emergence, in post-WWII Britain, of consumer culture. The centrality of subculture, and Cohen's influence within the CCCS is demonstrated in the 1975 anthology *Resistance Through Rituals*, which compiles a variety of research on

subculture by authors such as John Clarke, Paul Willis, Stuart Hall, Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie. Subculture provided the CCCS an opportunity to explore the links between class, youth culture, ideology and hegemony. Perhaps the most famous subcultural theorist to emerge from the CCCS was Dick Hebdige, best known for his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. In this study of the London punk rock scene, Hebdige builds on the work of Willis (particularly his belief in homology – this is, the internal coherence of a subculture) and Hall to generate a semiotic and anthropological approach to subcultural affiliation. In *Subculture*, Hebdige (1979) explains how humble objects like safety pins “can be magically appropriated; ‘stolen’ by subordinate groups and made to carry ‘secret’ meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance” (p. 18). Hebdige’s analysis decodes the habits, patterns and conspicuous consumption of so-called “spectacular subcultures.” As Hebdige (1979) writes, “Spectacular subcultures express forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial and behavioral codes, law breaking, etc.). They are profane articulations, and they are often and significantly defined as ‘unnatural’” (p. 92). The “profane” continues to be articulated, over 20 years later, through the pages of *Vice*, but the transgressive fashions and lifestyles described within the magazine are no longer defined as forbidden or unnatural by advertisers, marketers and the companies they represent. Thus, the economic and cultural shifts that have occurred since the 1970s necessitate a reconsideration of subcultural theory.

Recently, Muggleton (2000; 2003) along with Bennett & Harris (2004) and Stahl (1999) have challenged the work of the CCCS, particularly Hebdige. Under the loose

umbrella of “post-subculture,” these theorists have developed critiques that integrate post-modernism, challenge the class-based nature of the CCCS’s analysis, and dispute the homology of contemporary subcultures. Post-subculturalism integrates the changing economic and cultural environment produced by the postmodern conditions as described by David Harvey and Frederic Jameson. Muggleton & Weinzierl (2003), for example, point to the “fragmentation, flux and fluidity” endemic to contemporary youth culture, and argue that post-subcultural approaches are required to best decipher these new, unstable conglomerations, since the CCCS approach no longer reflects “the political, cultural and economic realities of the 21st century” (p. 3, 5). Post-subcultural theorists are also united in their desire to shift research away from the semiotic approach made famous by Hebdige in *Subculture* and return to a focus on ethnography.

Muggleton (2000) uses evidence of an emerging postmodern sensibility to argue that boundaries between various subcultures are porous. Muggleton’s (2000) research suggests that the subcultural constituents he studies “can be characterized as postmodern in that they display an individualistic, fragmented and diffuse sensibility” (p. 6). In order to dispute the homology of subcultures, Muggleton focuses on the individual members of a subculture and their idiosyncratic choices. As Ted Polhemus (1997) famously wrote, “What really sets our age apart from the golden age of subcultures is the sheer proliferation of options. We now inhabit a Supermarket of Style where, like tins of soup lined up on endless shelves, we can choose between more than fifty different styletribes” (p. 149-150). In describing style through the language of the marketplace, Polhemus acknowledges the postmodern tendency toward pastiche along with the influence of consumer culture on subcultural evolution. Indeed, a variety of theorists have attempted

to rethink subculture by creating labels such as neo-tribe, lifestyle, scene or styletribe. Echoing Polhemus, Muggleton (2000) argues that “subculturalists display a superficial and transient attachment to any one style as they regularly transgress the boundaries that serve to separate the conventional from the subcultural and specific subcultures from each other” (p. 82). The freedom to cut and paste or mix and match a multiplicity of styles helps generate an individualized, consumer-centric model of subcultural affiliation, rather than a community of like-minded citizens implied by homology.

Although Muggleton effectively identifies shortcomings in *Subculture*, he avoids discussing Hebdige’s later work, which acknowledges the postmodern environment Muggleton champions. In *Hiding in the Light*, Hebdige (1988) describes *The Face*, a British magazine that can be considered a precursor to *Vice*, as being “a magazine which goes out of its way every month to blur the line between politics and parody and pastiche; the street, the stage, the screen; between purity and danger; the mainstream and the ‘margins’: to flatten out the world” (p. 161). Unlike Muggleton, Hebdige (1988) both describes and debates the influence of postmodernism, challenging the imprecision of the term and the lazy thinking it can engender. Hebdige (1988) also bemoans the apolitical tenor of postmodernism, with its fixation with flatness and surface, writing that “the ghosts will go on gathering at the bitter line which separates truth from lies, justice from injustice” (p. 176).

Subcultural Capital

Related to research on subculture is Thornton’s (1996) concept of subcultural capital, which “confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder.... Just as

books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections” (p. 11). Here, Thornton extends Pierre Bourdieu’s work on social, intellectual and cultural capital as described in *Distinction*. The most relevant aspect of Thornton’s term is not in the suggestion that subcultures emulate the status rituals of their parent culture, but in the suggestion that subcultural capital operates according to an economic logic nearly identical to cultural capital. As Garnham & Williams (1986) argue, “While there is convertibility between economic and cultural capital in both directions ... it is the convertibility of cultural into economic capital that ultimately defines it as capital” (p. 123). Thornton (1996) believes that this convertibility also occurs within subcultures, and “while subcultural capital may not convert into economic capital with the same ease of financial reward as cultural capital, a variety of occupations and incomes can be gained as result of ‘hipness’” (p. 12). Isolating the elements that comprise subcultural capital is difficult, especially since hairstyles and music cycle in and out of fashion so rapidly. One useful gauge, according to Thornton (1996) is in the fact that “The social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn’t” (p. 105). Likewise, Heath (2001), in exploring the mechanics of hip consumerism through the lens of rational choice theory, argues that

The fact that cool people display an ironic attitude towards consumption, and are sometimes even vocal critics of consumerism, does not mean that they are not engaged in consumerist behavior. Often this is concealed by the fact that their consumer behavior is dominated by negative preferences, as with people who

would not be caught dead driving a Saturn, or eating at Burger King, or listening to Celine Dion, because doing so would be too “mainstream.” (p. 15)

By defining itself against the mainstream preferences of the parent culture, subcultural capital becomes an ever-shifting and dynamic collection of positive and negative preferences. Muggleton & Weinzierl (2003), in describing the work of Thornton, argue that “the boundaries that distinguish them [members of a subculture] from the inauthentic and commercial are understood as porous and permeable, requiring constant policing through the on-going process of classifying and reclassifying certain tastes as legitimate” (p. 10). Complicating this process of policing and reclassification is the fact that subcultural commodification is not a uni-directional process. Muggleton & Weinzierl (2003) argue that, “Subcultures of today are also complicit in the (niche) marketing of their own identities. There is a vivid role for subcultural-related practices as an entrepreneurial engine for the new media, fashion and cultural industries” (p. 8). With the pressure of commodification now emanating from within and outside a given subculture, Muggleton (2000) argues that instantaneity has replaced subcultural incubation. This instantaneity is described by journalist Adam Sternbergh (2003) in the *New York Times Magazine* as the “instantly passé trend.” Sternbergh writes that, “[In 2003] certain trends were declared both ascendant and passé simultaneously – often in the same news article. As a result, the formerly linear lifespan of a trend, from hot to not, now resembles something closer to a Mobius strip” (p. 76). Rob Walker, also writing in the *New York Times Magazine*, describes the emergence of the “brand underground,” a paradoxical movement typified by entrepreneurs such as Aaron Bondaroff, a thoroughly urban trend-

spotter from Manhattan's Lower East Side who has converted his bohemian lifestyle into a series of branded items. Bondaroff, better known as A-Ron, owns a store where he sells buttons, hats and matchbooks emblazed with his logo aNYthing, along with T-shirts that bear his image. Walker (2006) writes that

One reason an underground brand sounds nonsensical is that countercultures are supposed to oppose the mainstream, and nothing is more mainstream than consumerism. But we no longer live in a world of the Mainstream and the Counterculture. We live in a world of multiple mainstreams and countless counter-, sub- and counter-sub-cultures. Bondaroff's brand is built on both the sort of microfame that such a finely cut cultural landscape enables and on his absolutely exquisite ability to analyze that landscape. (p. 30)

Thornton is especially productive in explaining the underlying logic of subcultural capital, since she considers the role communication plays within subcultures. According to Thornton (1996), "Subcultural capital maintains its currency (or cultural worth) as long as it flows through channels of communication which are subject to varying degrees of restriction. The inaccessibility can be physical as in the case of carefully circulated flyers or intellectual in the case of indecipherable subcultural codes" (p. 160). Thornton's observations regarding inaccessibility outline the parameters for *Vice*'s retention of subcultural capital, since the very existence and mandate of *Vice* generates subcultural tensions, as Walker demonstrates. As Thornton (1996) writes, "Although the phrase 'subcultural consumer magazines' may at first seem to be a contradiction in terms, it accurately describes the editorial business of sustaining readerships by navigating the

underground tributaries (which flow into the ‘mainstream’) as well as the common interpretative community to which staff and subcultural members belong” (p. 155). The relationship between publication and subculture is reciprocal, and Thornton (1996) argues that “consumer magazines accrue credibility by affiliating themselves with subcultures, but also contribute to the authentication of cultural forms in the process of covering and constructing subcultures” (p. 155).

Political Economy of Magazines

According to McRobbie (1999), “In media and cultural studies, scholarship on magazines has occupied a less central and prestigious place than academic research on other media partly because magazines remain a narrow sector of the global communications industry” (p. 47). This has not prevented a variety of researchers, including McRobbie (1999) along with Nixon (1996), Stevenson et al (2000) and Edwards (1997) from using magazines as an object of study to reveal insights into masculinity, politics, male fashion and consumption. Research into the political economy of magazines has studied the effects of globalization on the Canadian magazine industry, along with the trend toward media industry consolidation and the limitations of editorial freedom imposed by the necessity of deriving significant revenues from advertising. In this way, the literature on magazines differs significantly from more established political economy debates about the relationship between the public sphere and newspapers. Bagdikian (1997), for example, writes that, “Newspapers are considered the most scrupulous of all the media subsidized by advertising” (p. 163). Ohmann (1996) reinforces the idea that the political and intellectual mandate of magazines differs

substantially from newspapers, writing that, “a magazine [does not] meet daily, specific, local needs in the way a newspaper does. Its hold is more tenuous, more dependent on the talents and interests of the editor and on his or her responsiveness to shifting tastes” (p. 355). Ohmann (1996), in discussing the explosion of monthly magazines in the United States between 1890 and 1905, concludes that magazines have always been in the business of creating audiences for advertisers. Both Bagdikian (1997) and Ohmann (1996) observe that magazine ads used to reside in the very back of publications, cleanly and clearly separated from the editorial. Ever since the physical barrier between advertising and editorial was removed, magazines have slowly eliminated various boundaries between content and ad copy. Furthermore, by selling a magazine for less than the cost to print it, and recouping that revenue through advertising, Ohmann (1996) believes magazines are in an economic position that forces them to create an editorial climate conducive to advertising.

Writing during the 1940s, Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno (1972) argued that, “In the most influential American magazines, *Life* and *Fortune*, a quick glance can now scarcely distinguish advertising from editorial picture and text” (p. 163). Schiffrin (2000), writing in a contemporary context, details the changes implemented by publishing magnate S.I. Newhouse after purchasing Condé Nast publishers, where “New design so blurred the line between editorial and advertising pages that only the most discerning reader could tell one from the other.... As time passed, magazines ranging from *Mademoiselle* to the *New Yorker* would undergo these changes” (p. 79). Schiffrin is particularly disappointed by the introduction of “advertiser-driven themes such as fashion so as to assure new and highly profitable advertising packages” in august publications

such as the *New Yorker* (p. 79). Sternbergh (1998), meanwhile, writing in *This* magazine, examines how magazines have altered their appearance and design to better accommodate advertising through an examination of magalogues (magazine-like catalogues). Sternbergh (1998) argues that “Serious publishers pride themselves on – and often fight pitched battles to preserve – the Church and State separation between their editorial content and their ads” (p. 17). However, as Sternbergh (1998) observes, that separation is becoming ever more transparent, where, “The distinction becomes one between advertisers hiring journalists to create a magazine that will please them (magalogues), and journalists creating magazines they think will please advertisers (*Stuff for Men*).” Providing an insider’s view of the process, *Ms. Magazine* founder Gloria Steinem (1990) reveals how advertising influences women’s magazines, describing demands for “supportive editorial atmosphere” and “complementary copy” (p. 18). In the same article, Steinem (1990) details the institutionalization of “insertion orders” from advertising salespeople, a term that refers to the type of editorial that is to be placed beside the advertising – in all cases that being positive, non-controversial material. In the case of Procter & Gamble, “its products were not to be placed in any issue that included any material on gun control, abortion, the occult, cults, or the disparagement of religion” (Steinem, p. 25). Providing further proof of advertiser influence, Russ Baker (1997), writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, describes how diaper-maker Kimberly-Clark requests that “happy baby editorial” appear beside its ads; how an auto maker requested the removal of nude imagery in a magazine article; and how an advertiser told *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News* it would monitor each publication for three months and give

their entire account to the magazine with the most compatible news coverage of said company.

Given a unique combination of population and geography, coupled with ongoing government initiatives toward cultural protectionism, Canadian theorists approach magazines more optimistically. Ted Magder (1998), for example, writes that, “Magazines do more than sell readers to advertisers; they are an important forum for the expression of the ideas, attitudes and values of the reading communities they represent” (p. 1). In their petition to the WTO dispute panel regarding Bill C-103 (a bill passed in 1996 by the Canadian government to prevent U.S. publishers from creating so-called split-run editions for the Canadian market), the Canadian statement included the following:

Magazines are distinct from ordinary articles of trade. Magazines are intended, by their very nature, for intellectual consumption as opposed to physical use (like a bicycle) or physical consumption (like food). It follows that the intellectual content of a cultural good such as a magazine must be considered its prime characteristic. (as quoted in Szeman, 2000, p. 218)

This attempt to cast magazines as a non-commodity was unsuccessful, and not every theorist is convinced that the Canadian magazine industry is outside the logic of commodification. Szeman (2000) expresses his economic determinism by noting that, “As ephemeral commodities that entice consumers by offering them perpetual ‘newness’ newspapers, magazines and other forms of media embody certain ‘cultural’ values and ideologies *irrespective* of the particularities of their content” (p. 221). Taken together, the political economy research into magazines offers a pessimistic assessment of a given

publication's ability to contribute productively to the public sphere. Furthermore, erosion between "Church and State" at many magazines has allowed advertisers to demand content that better suits their needs, to the detriment of readers.

Audience Commodity

Dallas Smythe's theory of the audience commodity helps explicate the role of ideology within the magazine industry. As Smythe (2001) explains, "the audience commodity is a nondurable producer's good which is bought and used in the marketing of the advertiser's product. The work which audience members perform for the advertiser to whom they have been sold is learning to buy goods and to spend their income accordingly" (p. 266). Or, as Featherstone (1991) describes it, the audience learns how "to use and consume appropriately and with natural ease in every situation" (p. 17). In this view, audiences are shaped and constituted as a specific consumer demographic through successive exposure to a particular magazine. This process of successive approximations in the service of producing an audience is, for Smythe, a form of labour. As Smythe (2001) explains, advertisers purchase "the services of audiences with predictable specifications which will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times to particular means of communication (television, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, and third-class mail) in particular market areas" (p. 257). According to Smythe's (2001) "free lunch theory,"

As with the *hors d'oeuvres* or potato chips and peanuts given to the customers of the pub, bar, or cocktail lounge, the function of the free lunch is to whet the appetite. In this case, to whet the prospective audience members' appetites and

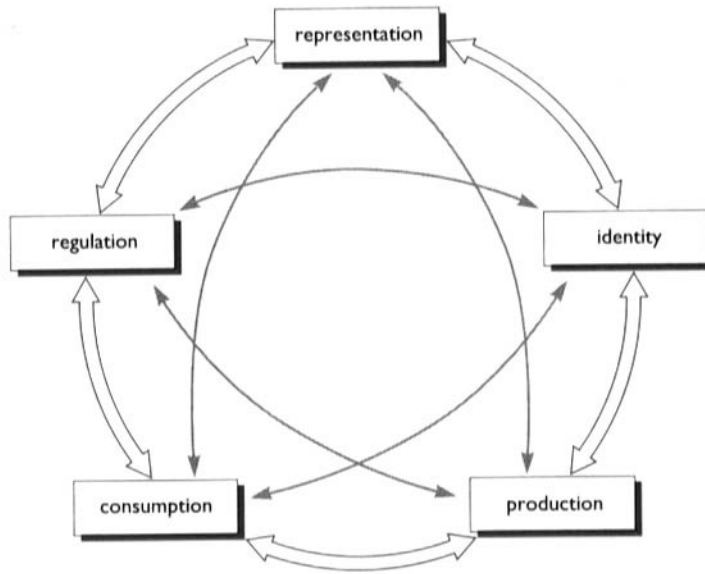
thus (1) attract and keep them attending to the program, newspaper, or magazine;
(2) cultivate a mood conducive to favorable reaction to the advertisers' explicit
and implicit messages. (p. 265)

This notion of the “conducive mood” to which Smythe refers is reinforced by the observations of Schifffrin, Sternbergh and Steinem. According to Mosco (1996), Smythe's theory of the audience commodity “aimed to rescue the materialist analysis of the media by demonstrating that it is the production of audiences for the general capitalist economy that is central to the commodification process rather than the production of ideology” (p. 149). As Babe (2000) explains, Smythe believed audience power was materialist “because people's *actions* (the manifestation of their indoctrination) can be observed and measured, whereas ‘programming’ and ‘messages’ lead merely to interpretative (i.e., subjective and speculative) analyses” (p. 134). According to Mosco (1996), the theory of the audience as commodity “brought together a triad that linked media, audiences and advertisers in a set of binding reciprocal relationships” (p. 148). The audience commodity theory, for Mosco (1996), provides a balance between viewing audiences as an “inert mass” or bestowing audiences with a limitless agency in the interpretive realm, thus addressing John Fiske's (1991) complaint that “Political economy cannot conceive of any audience activity that opposes the interests of the producers, whether this activity be one of semiosis or of discrimination” (p. 62). Using Smythe's audience as commodity allows magazine readers to escape the type of ideological inculcation implied by Szeman's economic determinism.

Cultural Intermediaries

In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) describes a new and emergent category of middle-class workers he categorizes as the “new petite bourgeoisie,” a group that comes into its own in all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sale, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services ... and in cultural production and organization ... which have expanded considerably in recent years. (p. 359)

Bourdieu calls this class of workers “cultural intermediaries” thus describing employees whose creative manipulation of symbolic goods (images, music, photography, text) situates them between consumers and artists. Keith Negus (2002) argues that “The central strength of the notion of cultural intermediaries is that it places an emphasis on those workers who come *in-between* creative artists and consumers (or more generally, production and consumption)” (p. 503). Sean Nixon and Paul du Gay (2002) echo Negus as they argue that “there is considerable strategic value to be gained from focusing upon these intermediary occupations. They force ... an opening up of the arena of cultural circulation, which has been poorly studied within cultural studies” (p. 498). du Gay’s (1997) diagram of the circuit of culture makes this relationship easier to visualize:



From *Doing Cultural Studies*, p. 3.

One of the strengths of cultural intermediaries is how the category isolates a specific cultural and economic location within the post-industrial, creative industries sector. For Featherstone (1991), “Given conditions of an increasing supply of goods, demand grows for cultural specialists and intermediaries who have the capacity to ransack various traditions and cultures in order to produce new symbolic goods, and in addition provide the necessary interpretations on their use” (p. 19). Through their ability to provide “necessary interpretations,” cultural intermediaries are thus ascribed political agency. Nixon & du Gay (2002) highlight Bourdieu’s belief that cultural intermediaries play a significant role in the “ethical retooling” of consumer capitalism, while Featherstone (1991) argues that cultural intermediaries have the “capacity to broaden and question the prevalent notions of consumption, to circulate images of consumption suggesting alternative pleasures and desires, consumption as excess, waste and disorder” (p. 497, p.

21). Referring to their ability to mediate between production and consumption, Negus (2002) argues that “cultural intermediaries tend to be accorded an active, self-conscious, reflexive and creative role in their particular activities” (p. 509). Research by McRobbie (1999) provides some evidence of this political and ethical agency, observing that

My research on young women magazine journalists also shows them to be political subjects, continually embroiled in debates on the sexual politics of magazine production. Several of these journalists and editors have described at length the battles they fight to balance the input of feminist ideas with the need to keep sales high and circulation figures healthy. (p. 28)

However, the circumstances and frequency with which the reflexivity and agency of cultural intermediaries is activated requires careful examination (Negus, 2002). For Negus (2002), research into the music industry demonstrates the “enduring *distance* between production and consumption”; he asks whether “cultural intermediaries have posed any challenge to traditional elites or dominant classes” (p. 505, 513). A careful reading of Bourdieu (1984) reveals a degree of pessimism regarding the political engagement of both the new bourgeoisie (the upper class) and the new petit bourgeoisie:

The new bourgeoisie is the initiator of the ethical retooling required by the new economy from which it draws its power and profits, whose functioning depends as much on the production of needs and consumers as on the production of goods. The new logic of the economy rejects the ascetic ethic of production and accumulation, based on abstinence, sobriety, saving and calculation, in favour of a

hedonistic morality of consumption, based on credit, spending and enjoyment. (p. 310)

This tension between asceticism and hedonism evokes the magical resolution described by Cohen, as Bourdieu describes a cultural shift that does not conflict with the logic of the marketplace. This new morality, for Bourdieu (1984), “boils down to an art of consuming, spending and enjoying” (p. 311). In turn, the new petite bourgeoisie (cultural intermediaries) are influenced by the new bourgeoisie’s rejection of the “old morality of duty,” a lifestyle of Protestant restraint (both economic and pleasure), and instead champion “a morality of pleasure as duty” (p. 367). Bourdieu (1984) suggests there are political limitations to pleasure, writing that, “It may even be wondered if the ethic of liberation is not in the process of supplying the economy with the perfect consumer whom economic theory has always dreamed of” (p. 371). Thus, the agency afforded to cultural intermediaries is a necessary but not sufficient cause for political or ethical interventions in consumer culture.

Rebel Consumption

In his essay “The Author As Producer,” first published in 1934, Walter Benjamin (1978) writes that, “we are faced with the fact ... that the bourgeois apparatus of production and publication can assimilate astonishing quantities of revolutionary themes, indeed, can propagate them without calling its own existence, and the existence of the class that owns it, seriously into question” (p. 229). Clarke et al. (1976), in their analysis of the turbulent 1960s, also comment on capitalism’s ability to profit from revolutionary

themes, and suggest that the modern middle classes “failed (as many members of the counter-cultures also failed) to see the cultural ‘break’ as, in its own traumatic and disturbing way, *profoundly adaptive* to the system’s productive base” (p. 65). Writing at approximately the same time, Daniel Bell (1976), in his book *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, argues that “The breakup of the traditional bourgeois value system, in fact, was brought about by the bourgeois economic system – by the free market, to be precise. This is the source of the contradiction of capitalism in American life” (p. 55). In order to better understand how the bourgeois profit from revolution and survive the breakup of their traditional value system unscathed, I consider Thomas Frank’s theories of rebel consumption. Frank first articulated his theory of rebel consumption in 1995 with the publication of his essay “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent” in *The Baffler*:

Consumerism is no longer about ‘conformity’ but about ‘difference.’ Advertising teaches us not in the ways of puritanical self-denial ... but in orgiastic, never-ending self-fulfillment.... We consume not to fit in, but to prove, on the surface at least, that we are rock ‘n’ roll rebels, each one of us as rule-breaking and hierarchy-defying as our heroes of the 60s, who now pitch cars, shoes and beer.

(p. 15)

Frank helps explain the apparently intractable contradictions in the organization and practice of capitalism, specifically, the contradictions between restraint and hedonism that encourage the creation of subcultural affiliations and their corresponding “magical

resolutions.” Developing his theories further in *The Conquest of Cool*, Frank (1997) writes,

The enthusiastic discovery of the counterculture by the branches of American business studied here marked the consolidation of a new species of hip consumerism, a cultural perpetual motion machine in which disgust with the falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppressions of consumer society could be enlisted to drive the ever-accelerating wheels of consumption. (p. 31)

Thus, cultural intermediaries are able to occupy a position in the circuit of culture that allows them to critique aspects of consumption, while at the same time their ability to ransack symbolic goods can be recuperated by capitalism. As Frank (1997) writes in the conclusion of *Conquest*, “Not only does hip consumerism recognize the alienation, boredom and disgust engendered by the demands of modern consumer society, but it makes of those sentiments powerful imperatives of brand loyalty and accelerated consumption” (p. 231). For Bell (1976), the instant gratification of the consumer arena and the delayed gratification of the business world were incompatible, resulting in a society where “One is to be ‘straight’ by day and a ‘swinger’ by night” (p. 72). But Frank’s (1997) hip consumption unifies these two spheres, so that, “However we may rankle under the bureaucratized monotony of our productive lives, in our consuming lives we are no longer merely affluent, we are *rebels*. Efficiency may remain the values of daytime, but by night we rejoin the nonstop carnival of our consuming lives” (p. 232). By providing consumers with an agency that simulates or evokes transgression or dissent, capitalist alienation can be resolved on a symbolic level. Although Frank makes no

reference to the work of Frederic Jameson, he is clearly extending the theories described in *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson (1991) argues that co-optation is now an inadequate language to describe

[A] situation in which we all, in one way or another, dimly feel that not only punctual and local countercultural forms of cultural resistance and guerrilla warfare but also even overtly political interventions ... are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it. (p. 49)

Jameson believes that cultural resistance is necessary to maintain the dynamism of capitalism, and should not be thought of as existing outside the logic of capitalism. That is, rage against the machine is just as much rage on behalf of the machine. Jameson (1991) argues that resistance can manifest itself in extreme expressions, and the offensive features of the postmodern revolt, from “sexually explicit material to psychological squalor and overt expressions of social and political defiance ... no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society” (p. 4). In a political and cultural environment that can assimilate almost any transgression or expression of defiance, resistance is futile in the political arena, but vital to the economic and cultural sphere.

Frank’s writing on hip consumption (and by association, Jameson’s work), has influenced a number of theorists. Karen Halnon (2005), in her article “Alienation Incorporated: ‘F*** the Mainstream Music’ in the Mainstream,” examines issues of

authenticity through “music that gives a loud, hostile, vile, and alienated ‘finger’ to the totality of officialdom” (p. 441). For Halnon (2005), “Authenticity – what is different, transgressive, unique, bizarre, deep, basic, raw, honest and unmediated – is especially attractive to consumer youth who inhabit a world of overprocessed and superficial brands, images and gimmicks” (p. 443-444). Halnon (2005) demonstrates that the commodification of dissent described by Frank can be extended to youth alienation and the “alienation experience,” as musicians are able to flaunt social norms and express inchoate anger while at the same time release albums for major record labels (p. 461). Heath (2001), meanwhile, along with Heath & Potter (2004) combine the work of Bourdieu and Frank in *The Rebel Sell*, an examination of competitive consumption through the concept of positional goods.

The Vice Niche

Despite their ability to isolate the contradictions inherent in cultural intermediaries and pseudo-rebellion, neither Heath & Potter, nor Frank, nor Halnon anticipate the niche strategies of *Vice*. As David Fielding (2001) argues in the *Ryerson Review of Journalism*:

The key to *Vice*'s success came in the lucrative advertising contracts it found with specialized urban clothing labels ... Advertising with *Vice* allowed a company to reach its audience directly without compromising any of its underground cachet... [A]dvertisers in *Vice* could bypass risking their integrity as underground labels by advertising with magazine giants. (p. 67)

Not only does *Vice* provide a suitable environment for underground clothing companies, but larger companies are for the most part prohibited from advertising in *Vice*. As McInnes (2003) explains to *Masthead* magazine, “Sketchers [a mainstream shoe company] can’t come in [advertise in the magazine]. Even for three times the full price. If you show discretion it pays back in spades,” (as quoted in Brown, 2003, p. 10). Niche media or narrowcasting typically refers to the creation of specialized content that appeals to a specific demographic of consumers, in the hopes of attracting advertisers who wish to target a small but attentive audience. Narrowcasting does not typically involve rejecting certain types of advertising. As cultural intermediaries, the co-founders of *Vice* have created a particularly deft niche media strategy. As Walker (2006) demonstrates, there are multiple mainstreams and undergrounds, and *Vice* occupies and navigates a “finely cut cultural landscape” identical to that of brand underground entrepreneur Bondaroff¹ (p. 30). Fielding (2001) observes that *Vice* “exists in the urban underbelly of the counterculture and in mainstreet consumer culture, two worlds that are, by definition, opposites” (p. 68). This attempt to balance “countercultural rebellion and capitalism” is described by *Vice* co-founder Alvi as “punk capitalism” or “punk-rock capitalism” (Fielding, 2001; Patten, 2002). Finding a balance between the counterculture and the mainstream requires the oppositional logic of negative consumer preferences described by Heath. This explains why *Vice* avoids celebrity coverage, and why a photo caption in vol. 12 no. 8 asks readers, “Have you been to a normal-person [dance] club recently? The kind where ugly people line up outside?” (p. 74). Furthermore, *Vice*’s unique method of

¹ *Vice*’s former photo editor, Ryan McGinley, is friends with Bondaroff.

distribution allows the magazine to publish transgressive counterculture content in the first place. In 1998, just as *Vice* was preparing to launch a national edition in Canada, a distribution deal with Cargo Records collapsed and the three co-founders “were forced to set up a national distribution system literally overnight by calling in favours and bartering ads” (Patten, 2002). Their distribution system bypassed newsstands entirely, and instead placed free magazines in stores congruent with *Vice*’s content and attitude. According to *Vice* co-founder Shane Smith (2002), “One big reason for [our] fanatical fan base was that our content was not influenced by the hugely conservative distribution companies that run all magazine circulation in North America. Because we were free we didn’t have to kowtow to their censorship and editorial pressure” (p. 2). Given the decreasing agency regarding editorial decisions within the magazine industry, *Vice* derives significant subcultural capital from its ability to publish transgressive and advertiser-unfriendly content. *Vice* also dismisses, ironizes and self-deprecates the consumer element of their “subcultural consumer magazine” in order to maintain the respect of their readership. *Vice*’s editorial agency, however, serves to mask the ideologies and values inferred by Imre Szeman – that is, the perpetual newness of the magazine marks it as a consumer commodity regardless of content or method of distribution. As a free magazine *Vice* is dependant on advertising for much of its revenue, and its subcultural focus is compatible with the theory of audience as commodity.

Another distinctive aspect of *Vice*’s publishing strategy is its decision, in recent years, to cap its circulation in North America. In March of 1999, *Masthead* magazine reported that *Vice* had a circulation of 60,000 with distribution in Toronto, Vancouver, New York and L.A. (1999, p. 12). By the spring of 2004, *Vice* had an international

circulation of 350,000 and a US/North American circulation of 175,000, with an average of 6.93 readers per issue (Powell, 2004; Siddiqi, 2004). Despite the success of the magazine, circulation is kept artificially low because, according to Shane Smith, “There are around 200,000 cool people in America, and that’s it” (as quoted in Schnuer, 2004, p. S19). Smith’s glib assertion masks a more complex explanation for *Vice*’s circulation strategies. According to David Sax (2006), writing in *Canadian Business*, “No excessive printing guarantees an active and interested readership ... *Vice* is only available at hip, urban, mostly independent clothing stores, bars and music shops” (p. 18). Learmonth (2003) reinforces this theory, writing in *Folio* magazine that “The free distribution model and limited [circulation] creates scarcity, and demand for the magazine” (p. 6). Although it might seem counterintuitive, *Vice* benefits from this underexposure, since it ensures a magazine pick up rate of 100 percent, as compared with an average newsstand pick up rate for paid magazines of less than 50 percent.

The scarcity of *Vice* also recalls Thornton’s (1996) belief that subcultural capital is best retained through limiting channels of communications, be it physically or intellectually – such as the (sub)cultural competencies required to decode the content of *Vice*. As Shawn Phelan (2004), *Vice*’s Canadian Director of Marketing, explains in a *Marketing* magazine interview, many advertisers fail to comprehend the popularity of *Vice*, given its provocative content, “But that’s not the point. It’s not for you to understand. Your average brand manager is not part of this demographic” (as quoted in Powell, 2004, p. 7). This indecipherability becomes a source of value for *Vice*, as it demonstrates that the magazine possess the requisite subcultural knowledge required to connect with its ideal reader. Yet the opaque nature of *Vice*’s transgressions confounds

theories of hip consumption. Frank describes an economic environment where transgression is seamlessly integrated into magazines and television shows: “a showplace of transgression and inversion of values, of humiliated patriarchs and shocked puritans and magazine advertisements” (p. 4-5). But for *Vice*, certain expressions of transgression are not, as Jameson puts it, “received with the greatest complacency.” In a *Folio* magazine interview, co-founder McInnes (2005) admits that, “For most of our advertisers, it’s a long-term sell. They’ll say to themselves, ‘We morally hate what they do, but I gotta admit, they’re good at it, and our customers think they’re cool’” (as quoted in Stableford, p. 37). In order to explain *Vice*’s self-limiting strategies of advertising, and address the limitations of Frank’s theories, it is necessary to rethink the role of transgression within the magazine.

Edge

Augmenting rebel consumption requires “edge,” an analytic category that describes magazines, movies or television shows whose content serves to limit their audience. For Curtin & Streeter (2001), edge is defined as “media texts whose effectiveness is precisely that they do not soothe” (p. 228). Andre Picard (1998), writing in the *Globe and Mail* observes that, “If you’ve ever scoffed at a skateboarder, sneered at a squeegee punk, recoiled from hip-hop music or complained about pornography in advertising, chances are *Vice* magazine is not for you” (p. A2). *Vice*’s edgy content entices a specific set of readers while at the same time repelling a mainstream magazine audience. As Curtin & Streeter (2001) argue, “Those products targeted at niche audiences actively pursue intensity. They seek out audiences that are more likely to be invested in a

particular form of cultural expression” (p. 231). Curtin & Streeter’s work on edge offers a framework for considering *Vice*’s content as part of a larger strategy:

Products with edge sharply define the boundaries of their intended audience. They try to find a place in today’s bewildering proliferation of channels, programs, and audience cultures with what is imaged to be a demographically focused appeal.

Edge is thus simultaneously an aesthetic category and an industrial strategy, a cultural/industrial effort to establish sharp distinctions, to delineate a path through the otherwise bewildering media landscape. (p. 229)

By sharply defining the boundaries of their readership through transgressive content, the edge of *Vice* helps retain subcultural capital while also shaping the magazine’s audience into a subcultural commodity. As Michael Learmonth (2003) explains in *Folio* magazine, “*Vice* isn’t for everyone. But that’s the point. Their advertisers don’t want to reach everyone and the editorial screens out all but the most desirable demographic to the street marketing gurus” (p. 6). What the limiting category of edge suggests is that not all transgression is created equal. The co-founders of *Vice* must continually consider both the aesthetic and the industrial aspects of edge to remain successful, as they seek a balance between keeping readership engaged and providing a suitable environment for advertising. According to Sax (2006), “Any dilution of the [*Vice*] brand would shed credibility with readers, and with that, advertiser value. Balancing that with advertisers’ limits is what remains tricky” (p. 18). Sax (2006) also observes that, “Advertising economics dictate that *Vice* should eventually have to water down content to attract mainstream North American advertisers. What they’ve done instead is franchise the

brand, launching international editions to pull in revenue from the four corners of the globe, while keeping content edgy” (p. 18). Its investment in “edge” directs *Vice* toward a wide but narrow media niche, a niche that is unstable by its very definition.

Edge complicates rebel consumption, and involves a particularly delicate negotiation because, as Curtin & Streeter (2001) observe, “Efforts to industrialize *edge* are in some sense an effort to work against the very structures that undergird commercial media” (229). Like the complex logic guiding the retention and conversion of subcultural capital as demonstrated by Bondaroff and the “brand underground,” preserving edge requires a careful and ongoing negotiation between audience and publication in order to industrialize edge with the appropriate degree of nuance. Making this task trickier is that *Vice*’s preferred tool for creating and maintaining edge is the bludgeon of transgressive content.

Transgression

The founders of *Vice* would undoubtedly find it amusing to learn that Bell (1976), writing 30 years ago, argued that, “There are today almost no taboos left to transgress” (p. 167). Judging from letters to the editor and various journalism articles, *Vice* continues to find taboos to break. Chris Jenks (2003) provides a useful definition when he writes that “to transgress is to go beyond the bounds or limits sets by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe” (p. 2). Jenks relies upon the foundational work of Georges Bataille who provides a thorough philosophical exploration of taboo and transgression. For Bataille (1998), “Transgression is associated with the sacred, the moment of rupture when the excluded element that is forbidden by the taboo, is brought

into focus” (p. 51). Bataille’s language of the “forbidden” and the “sacred” evokes Hebdige’s “profane articulations,” demonstrating an interrelation between subculture, transgression and *Vice*. In *Erotism*, Bataille (1986) systematically explores taboo, the violation of taboo, and the resulting sin or transgression. In describing taboos as irrational, Bataille (1986) suggests they are a product of social construction: “We have to take into consideration the irrational nature of taboos if we want to understand the indifference to logic they constantly display” (p. 64). The contested and constructed aspect of taboo helps explain why *Vice* readers and *Vice* advertisers interpret transgression in different ways.

Bataille (1986) also explains the utility of taboo and transgression, arguing that “Taboos are there to make work possible; work is productive; during the profane period allotted to work consumption is reduced to the minimum consistent with continued production” (p. 68). In doing so, Bataille argues that economic imperatives limit and restrict transgression, rather than morality. By no coincidence, *Vice* rarely makes reference to employment within its pages, choosing instead to highlight the profane and the unproductive. Bataille (1986) also explores the tension between the rational (work) and violence (which includes both murder and the “tumultuous urges” of desire), in the process anticipating Bell’s contradiction (p. 41). Bataille (1986) argues that work, demands rational behaviour where the wild impulses worked out on feast days and usually in games are frowned upon. If we were unable to repress these impulses we should not be able to work, but work introduces the very reason for repressing them. These impulses confer an immediate satisfaction on those who yield to them. Work, on the other hand, promises to those who overcome them a

reward later on whose value cannot be disputed except from the point of view of the present moment. (p. 41)

Although he implies the licensed transgression of carnival through his reference to “feast days,” Bataille also hints at Bell’s straight by day, swinger by night paradox. Bataille (1998) also anticipates Frank when he writes that “The transgression comes to be associated with the idea of the rebel, the one who refuses to accept the authority of the taboo” (p. 51). The source of *Vice*’s rebellion stems from challenging the irrationality of taboos. Frank (1997) describes the “carnival of our consuming lives” and considers television a “showplace of transgression,” in the process making Bataille relevant to theories of hip consumerism (p. 232, p. 4). Jenks (2003) echoes this relationship in arguing that:

Every rule, limit, boundary or edge carries with it its own fracture, penetration or impulse to disobey. The transgression is a component of the rule. Seen in this way, excess is not an aberration nor a luxury, it is rather a dynamic force in cultural reproduction – it prevents stagnation by breaking the rule and it ensures stability by reaffirming the rule. (p. 7)

Like Jameson, Jenks believes that the transgression of taboos are a necessary component of keeping capitalism dynamic and energized. Bataille (1986) writes that “The frequency – and the regularity – of transgression do not affect the intangible stability of the prohibition since they are its expected complement” (p. 65). That is, taboos are designed to be broken, but transgression, as an anticipated complement of the ritual of the taboo,

does not reduce the taboo's power. Ross Chambers (1991) offers another method of considering the licensed or sanctioned nature of taboo and transgression when he argues that, "Between the possibility of disturbance in the system and the system's power to recuperate that disturbance there is 'room for maneuver,' and it is in that space of 'play' or 'leeway' in the system that oppositionality arises and change can occur" (p. xi). This "play" or "leeway" evokes the category of cultural intermediaries, and helps situate the limits of *Vice*'s transgressions and disturbances. Chambers (1991) also outlines the subtleties of power, writing that,

Oppositional behaviour consists of individual or group survival tactics that do not challenge the power in place, but make use of circumstances set up by that power for purposes the power may ignore or deny. It contrasts, then, with revolution, which is a mode of *resistance* to forms of power it regards as illegitimate, that is, as a force that needs to be opposed by a counterforce. (p. 1)

The distinction between oppositional behaviour and revolution illuminates *Vice*'s political room to maneuver. Oppositional behaviour offers no challenge to power, unlike revolution and resistance, but *Vice* is able to elide the distinction between the two categories through the use of transgression. Scott (1990), meanwhile, offers the metaphor of the "hidden transcript" and the "public transcript" to describe the space and leeway theorized by Chambers. Scott uses the hidden transcript in the context of historically marginalized groups such as African American Slaves and 18th century peasants, but his metaphorical framework remains useful in the context of *Vice* and transgression. For Scott (1990), the hidden transcript is created and developed in opposition to the public

transcript, which comprises “a domain of public mastery and subordination ... and, finally, a domain of ideological justification for inequalities” (p. 111). The hidden transcript contains “the offstage responses and rejoinders to that public transcript. It is, if you will, the portion of an acrimonious dialogue that domination has driven off the immediate stage” (p. 111). The co-founders of *Vice* can hardly be considered subjugated, although the magazine has been sued for its “acrimonious dialogue.” Like oppositional behaviour, Scott (1990) argues that, “No matter how elaborate the hidden transcript may become, it always remains a substitute for an act of assertion directly in the face of power” (p. 115). Unlike many theorists (Eagleton 1982; Featherstone 1991; Frank 1997), Scott critiques the pressure valve approach that views sanctioned modes of transgression like the carnival as politically inert. For Scott (1990), symbolic resistance has links and relationships with material resistance, and he writes that,

The bond between domination and appropriation means that it is impossible to separate the ideas and symbolism of subordination from a process of material exploitation. In exactly the same fashion, it is impossible to separate veiled symbolic resistance to the ideas of domination from the practical struggles to thwart or mitigate exploitation. (p. 188)

Scott’s work can be used to explain *Vice*’s use of transgression and their political agency as cultural intermediaries. If “veiled symbolic resistance” can be considered a precursor to “practical struggles,” then the transgressive imagery of *Vice* takes on a political valence, regardless of the co-founders’ material or ethical intentions. Fiske (1987) similarly argues that “The opposition of popular pleasures to social control means that

they always contain the potential for resistance or subversion: the fact that this subversive or resistive activity is semiotic or cultural rather than social or even military does not denude it of any effectivity” (p. 241). This “potential” recalls the political indeterminacy demonstrated by cultural intermediaries. *Vice*’s conflation of semiotic and cultural activity with resistance produces transgression and other iterations of oppositional behaviour swaddled in hip and “revolutionary” urban clothing.

Conclusion

I have used this literature review to situate my object of study within theories of subculture, political economy, hip consumerism and transgression. Although the hedonism of *Vice* is closer to a lifestyle than a homologous subculture, Thornton and Muggleton’s work makes subculture a productive explanatory category. Thornton’s subcultural capital provides a flexible method of thinking about and describing how *Vice* makes a profit from its focus on fashion, underground music and the valorization of illicit drugs. My exploration of political economy moves beyond simply describing the economic constraints that govern the production of magazines to include Smythe’s work on the audience as commodity and Bourdieu’s category of cultural intermediaries. I have also demonstrated the relevance of Frank’s work on hip consumption to *Vice*, while at the same time acknowledging Frank’s debt to Jameson. By extending Frank’s theories, I have shown that it is impossible to understand the niche media strategies of *Vice* without Curtin & Streeter’s “edge.” The magazine’s method of distribution, its limitations on advertising and the difficulty it faces in recuperating transgression make it a unique magazine to analyze. I will refer to specific aspects of this literature review during my

critical discourse analysis of *Vice*'s written and photographic content. But before I begin this analysis, I will present my methodological and theoretical approaches in Chapter Three, which complement the literature and approaches described in this literature review.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Intro

In my analysis I combine Michel Foucault's theories of discursive formations and Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis to interrogate the visual and pictorial content of *Vice*. I begin by considering the rules governing discursive formations and explore Foucault's use of the "statement" as his unit of analysis, as detailed in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. I focus on Foucault's belief that a given formation is maintained by a set of rules that authorize certain statements and deauthorize others. Although Foucault provides theoretical justification for analyzing the text of *Vice*, he provides few hints for how to accomplish this task. Thus, I will use Fairclough's systematic method of critical discourse analysis to complement Foucault. I explore the mechanics of critical discourse analysis and explain how Fairclough's methods reinforce Foucault's belief that analyzing statements necessitates looking beyond a particular discursive formation. Fairclough's methodology isolates three distinct elements of discourse – text, discursal practice and social practice – and creates dialectical relationships between these elements. In arguing that language is constitutive, that is, socially shaping, Fairclough enlists the theory of hegemony to explore the ideological aspects of language. I then use Hall's model of encoding/decoding to reinforce Fairclough's use of hegemony.

Through the photographic theory of Alan Sekula and Hall's discussion of visual "naturalness," I justify how critical discourse analysis can be used with photographs as well as written texts. Having mapped out a relevant terrain of critical discourse analysis, I

discuss Philips & Jorgensen's (2002) cautions regarding multiperspectival research frameworks. I use the metaphor of "hiding in delight" to focus my analysis, a metaphor that combines Hebdige's work on pleasure and subculture. After revealing the origins of hiding in delight, I use Linda Hutcheon's theories on irony to explain how irony provides *Vice* with a discursive space to "hide." Through an examination of the edge of irony, I link Hutcheon with Curtin & Streeter. I consider the similarities between cultural and subcultural competencies, and extend the work of Regina Lewis through the term (sub)cultural competencies, a concept that explains how members of a subculture are able to decode successfully a subculture magazine like *Vice*. I also consider the crucial role of pleasure in relation to (sub)cultural competencies, and how pleasure helps convince *Vice* readers to remain engaged by the magazine. Finally, I explain how the content of *Vice* was surveyed and how analytic categories were generated.

Methodological Considerations

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault explores the limitations of linguistic analysis, and in so doing formulates the technique of discourse analysis. Foucault (2002) contrasts the two approaches by arguing that in linguistic analysis, the question asked is "according to what rules has a particular statement been made, and consequently according to what rules could other similar statements be made?" whereas the events of discourse provoke the question "how is it that one particular statement appeared rather than another?" (p. 30). Foucault's (2002) unit of analysis is the "statement," summed up in the following assertion: "the term discourse can be defined as the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation; thus I shall be able to

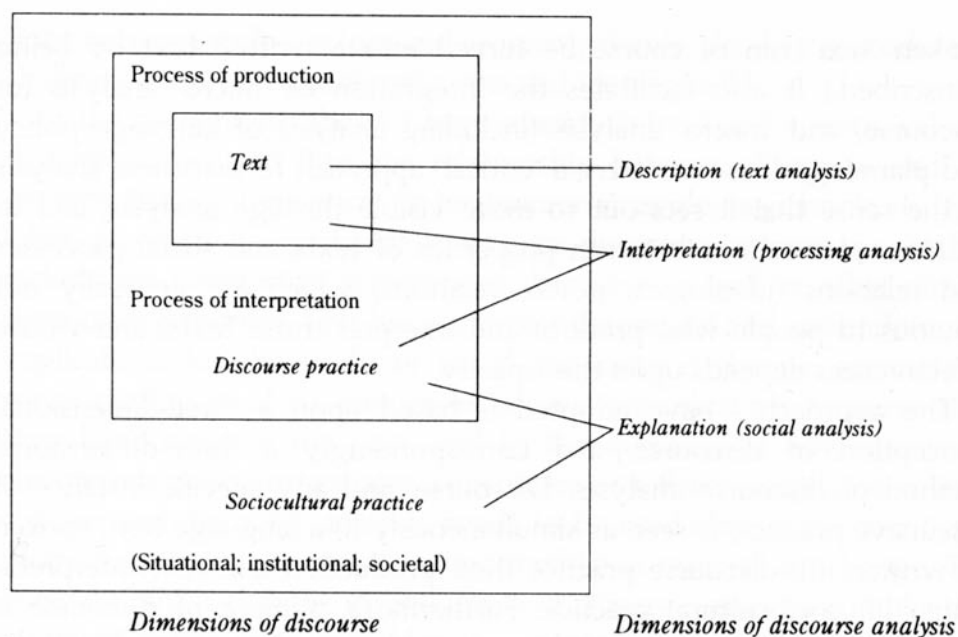
speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse” (p. 121). For Foucault (2002) a “discursive formation” defines a regularity “between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices” (p. 41). Foucault (2002) argues that the generation and maintenance of statements within a discursive formation adhere to a formalized, internalized logic: “The conditions to which the elements of this division [the discursive formation] (objects, mode of statement, concepts, thematic choices) are subjected we shall call the *rules of formation*. The rules of formation are conditions of existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance) in a given discursive division” (p. 42). For Foucault, a crucial aspect of any analysis is determining what statements are unauthorized or disallowed.

Foucault (2002) makes a distinction between the traditional concerns of linguistic analysis, where researchers dig below a text to discover “a hidden element, a secret meaning that lies buried within them” and the statement, which Foucault claims “is neither visible nor hidden” (p. 122). Determining that which is neither hidden nor visible in a given statement requires moving outside the text itself. For Foucault (2002), “The analysis of statements can never confine its attention to the things said, to the sentences that were actually spoken or written, to the ‘signifying’ elements that were traced or pronounced” (p. 122). The task of the researcher, then, is not only to assess statements within a formation, but to consider statements from complementary or competing formations to determine what ideas or logics have been eliminated, erased or otherwise minimized. In defending the statement as his unit of analysis, Foucault (2002) concludes that “one can define the general set of rules that govern the status of these statements, the

way in which they are institutionalized, received, used, re-used, combined together, the mode according to which they become objects of appropriation, instruments for desire or interest, elements for a strategy” (p. 129). For Foucault (2002), the consideration of statements requires a change of viewpoint on the part of the researcher, since the statement “is not presented to the perception as the manifest bearer of its limits and characteristics. It requires a certain change of viewpoint and attitude to be recognized and examined in itself. Perhaps it is like the over-familiar that constantly eludes one” (p. 124). While discourse analysis demands reflexivity on the part of the researcher – a reflexivity that that could incorporate this “change of viewpoint” – Foucault does not provide detailed instructions for making the “over-familiar” less elusive. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (2002) admits that he has not yet succeeded in mastering the regularity of discourse analysis and makes it clear that “I am not developing here a theory, in the strict sense of the term” (p. 128). Thus, Foucault’s pioneering work on discursive formations and the attendant rules that govern them provides a crucial conceptual and theoretical bedrock for discourse analysis but requires methodological supplementation.

Across a series of books, Norman Fairclough has generated a systematic, repeatable approach to discourse analysis (see for example: 1989, 1995a, 1995b, 2003). In *Language and Power*, for example, Fairclough (1989) describes ten different questions that the researcher can ask in relation to a particular text. Divided into the categories of vocabulary, grammar and textual structures, Fairclough’s questions help to isolate ideologically contested phrases or the modality of the writer, providing a comprehensive and step-by-step approach to discourse analysis. Fairclough supplements this instruction-

manual approach to analysis with a sophisticated theoretical model. In *Critical Discourse Analysis*, Fairclough (1995a) writes, “I see discourse as a complex of three elements: social practice, discursial practice (text production, distribution and consumption), and text, and the analysis of a specific discourse calls for analysis in each of these three dimensions and their interrelations” (p. 74). These elements relate to one another dialectically: the text and discursial practice form one pair of oppositions while discursial practice and social practice form another. Fairclough offers a diagram to better consider this interrelation:



Fairclough (1995a), p. 98.

This three-part procedure for a given text represents a sophisticated and methodologically robust approach to texts. As Fairclough's (1995a) diagram indicates, language is a social

practice, and discourse “is always a socially and historically situated mode of action, in a dialectical relationship with other facets of ‘the social’ (its ‘social context’) – it is socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping, or *constitutive*” (p. 131). In this formulation, individuals possess agency, but are also subject to the effects of forces outside their immediate awareness. In providing a clear definition of his approach, Fairclough (1995a) explains,

By ‘critical’ discourse analysis I mean discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and text, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony. (p. 132-133)

Fairclough’s repeated references to opacity indicate the central role of hegemony in the formulation of critical discourse analysis. As Fairclough (1995a) writes, “Hegemony cuts across and integrates economy, politics and ideology, yet ascribes an authentic place to each of them with an overall focus upon politics and power” (p. 76). Opacity, then, is a way of describing how ideology comes to be naturalized through the process of hegemony. For Fairclough (1995a), a key goal of critical discourse analysis is to denaturalize discourse and make it transparent, because “Naturalization gives to particular ideological representations the status of common sense, and thereby makes them opaque, i.e. no longer visible as ideologies” (p. 42). Fairclough is indebted to the

work of Antonio Gramsci, whose theories of hegemony help researchers understand how, through common sense, ideologies are made invisible. Fairclough (1995a) argues that there is a dialectic between social practice and discourse practice because he believes that “language is a material form of ideology, and language is invested by ideology” (p. 73). Thus, one way to expose the ideologies that hegemony has made invisible is through critical discourse analysis. From this perspective, the self-reflexivity of *Vice* can be understood as an attempt by the co-founders to circumvent the ideological aspects of their magazine. Through “the reveal,” the co-founders try to lay bare their political or economic tendencies, in the process destabilizing the effects of naturalization. However, as Fairclough (1980) argues, “A particular set of discourse conventions ... implicitly embodies certain ideologies – particular knowledge and beliefs, particular ‘positions’ for the types of social subject that participate in that practice” (p. 94). Regardless of how *Vice* manipulates its discourse, the strategy of transparency and disclosure represents a type of ideological practice. However, as Foucault demonstrates, interrogating a statement in an appropriate manner is not easy.

Fairclough (1995a) argues that “ideologies reside in texts. While it is true that the forms and content of texts do bear the imprint of ideological processes and structures, it is not possible to ‘read off’ ideologies from text. This is because meanings are produced through interpretations of text and texts are open to diverse interpretations” (p. 71). To better demonstrate the range of interpretative possibility of a given text in relation to the theory of hegemony, I will discuss Stuart Hall’s (1980) complementary model of encoding/decoding. In describing how audiences negotiate meaning in television programs, Hall separates the production of a given program from its consumption. Hall

(1980) describes a circuit of linked moments that resembles du Gay's diagram of the circuit of culture described in Chapter Two, although Hall's circuit encompasses production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction. The production of a program entails a combination of frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructure (Hall, 1980). However, the consumption of a text, that is, its decoding by an audience member, also requires frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructure. As Hall (1980) argues

It is in the *discursive* form that the circulation of the product takes place, as well as its distribution to different audiences. Once accomplished, the discourse must then be translated – transformed, again – into social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective. If no “meaning” is taken, there can be no “consumption.” If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect. (p. 128)

The process of decoding a media text creates the possibility of multiple interpretations since no two audience members possess identical frameworks of knowledge or relations of production. Hall (1980) describes three different positions of decoding: the dominant-hegemonic position (the encoded intent is received without negotiation), the negotiated position (the encoded intent is received, but with a mixture of “adaptive and oppositional elements”) and finally, the opposition position (where the encoded intent is situated within “an alternate framework of reference”) (p. 137, 138). Hall's limited set of decoding positions have been challenged and extended by a variety of theorists, but David Morley (1991) argues that Hall's encoding/decoding model “avoids sliding straight

from the notion of a text as having a determinate meaning (which would necessarily impose itself in the same way on all members of the audience) to an equally absurd, and opposite position, in which it is assumed that the text is completely ‘open’ to the reader and is merely the site upon which the reader constructs meaning” (p. 18). The middle road provided by Hall questions both Fiske’s polysemic playground of audience resistance, but also addresses political economy’s narrow, production-centric approach to how meaning is received. A critical discourse analysis involves decoding the hegemonic position of a text in order to interrogate the frameworks of knowledge and relations of production used in encoding a media text. In doing so, critical discourse analysis takes advantage of the “change of viewpoint” provided by an oppositional position and allows the researcher to determine that which is “neither hidden nor visible.”

Fairclough (1995a) argues that critical discourse analysis is applicable to written statements *and* photography: “Like many linguists, I shall use discourse to refer primarily to spoken or written language use, though I would also wish to extend it to include semiotic practice in other semiotic modalities such as photography” (p. 131). Alan Sekula (1982a), meanwhile, in his essay “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” offers a definition of discourse that accords with both Foucault and Fairclough, writing that, “The discourse is, in the most general sense, the context of the utterance, the conditions that constrain and support its meaning, that determine its semantic target” (p. 85). Sekula (1982a) uses this definition to imply that the photograph is “an ‘incomplete’ utterance, a message that depends on some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability. That is, the meaning of any photographic message is necessarily context-determined” (p. 85). This argument reinforces Fairclough’s (1995a) belief that discourse

is constitutive. But adding to the opacity of this “matrix of conditions” is the “naturalness” of an image. As Sekula (1982a) argues, “Photographic ‘literacy’ is learned. And yet, in the real world, the image itself appears ‘natural’ and appropriate, appears to manifest an illusory independence from the matrix of suppositions that determines its readability” (p. 86). Hall broaches this issue in “Encoding/Decoding,” writing that, “Naturalism and ‘realism’ – the apparent fidelity of the representation to the thing or concept represented – is the result, the effect, of a certain specific articulation of language on the ‘real.’ It is the result of a discursive practice” (p. 132). Given the central role of photography in *Vice*, extending critical discourse analysis to imagery is required for a thorough understanding of the magazine’s strategies.

I believe that Fairclough’s approach to critical discourse analysis is both methodologically robust and, equally important, relevant to the study of *Vice*. Beginning with Foucault, and moving through Fairclough, Hall and Sekula, I have constructed a methodological framework that integrates both theoretical and practical considerations. Critical discourse analysis, in conjunction with a focus on identifying the rules governing *Vice*’s discursive formation will provide a flexible but analytically thorough method of interrogating the visual and pictorial content of *Vice*.

Philips & Jorgensen (2002) argue that, “critical discourse analysis will, then, always involve the trans-disciplinary integration of different theories within a multiperspectival research framework – linguistic theory and analysis can never suffice to account for the non-discursive aspects of the phenomenon in question” (p. 86). That is, interrogating the dialectics within critical discourse analysis requires, by necessity, an examination of theories and discourses that reside outside the text being considered.

Philips & Jorgensen (2002) argue that the job of the researcher is to ensure that “The different discourse analytical and non-discourse analytical theories ... need to be translated into an integrated theoretical and analytical framework, where they are adapted to one another and to the aim of the research project” (p. 86). Ensuring that the theories applied to *Vice* are complementary and appropriate requires creating a framework of containment, to which I turn now.

Theoretical Considerations

To ensure that my critical discourse analysis effectively integrates my non-discourse theoretical approaches, I have created an overarching metaphor (“hiding in delight”) to guide and focus my research. The origins of this metaphor can be found in the title essay of Dick Hebdige’s (1988) book *Hiding in the Light*, where he writes, “Subculture forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is *a hiding in the light*” (p. 35, emphasis added). As discussed in Chapter Two, *Vice* uses targeted distribution and circulation scarcity to create the appearance of evading surveillance. But as the post-subculturalist literature suggests, the boundaries between mainstream culture and subculture are porous. Thornton’s (1996) work demonstrates that a related process of negotiation occurs *within* any given subculture – for example, how subcultural capital is lost or retained. Subcultures are often complicit in their decision to niche market themselves, as Muggleton & Weinzierl (2003) argue. Subcultures must constantly renegotiate their relationship with the mainstream, making surveillance between subculture and parent culture multi-directional. In alternating between

subcultural subterfuge and aggressive promotional savvy, *Vice* can be said to “hide in the light.” The veiled aspect of *Vice* explains the first half of “hiding in delight.” For the remainder of the metaphor, I turn to the concluding chapter of *Hiding in the Light*. In a discussion of the postmodern UK magazine *The Face*, Hebdige (1988) writes, “The consumer ... replaces the citizen. The *pleasure-seeking bricoleur* replaces the truth-and-justice seeking rational subject of the Enlightenment. The now replaces history” (p. 166, emphasis added). Uniting this idea with the previous quotation is Hebdige’s focus on pleasure – in the first instance, scopic pleasure, in the second, a postmodern subjectivity that replaces the rational with the pursuit of hedonism. The business success of *Vice*, including its numerous brand extensions, and the co-founder’s eagerness to be profiled by mainstream journalists, demonstrates that *Vice* is clearly energized through “the pleasure of being watched” (Hebdige, 1988, p. 35). Such a description is equally applicable to the content and attitude of *Vice*, a publication that has foregrounded hedonism throughout its history, through photographs, fashion spreads and articles that describe and depict drug use, the over-consumption of alcohol and the pursuit of sexual release. Taking inspiration from Hebdige, I have woven his two interrelated ideas on pleasure to create the metaphor of *hiding in delight*. In the next two chapters, I will use this metaphor to explore the intersections of transgression, pleasurable politics, (sub)cultural competencies and irony in *Vice*.

Irony, as theorized by Linda Hutcheon, is central to the metaphor of hiding in delight. As Hutcheon (1994) explains, “Irony is the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented” (p. 11). Consideration of the nature and function of irony is related to critical discourse analysis,

because, as Hutcheon (1994) argues, irony “undermines stated meaning by removing the semantic security of ‘one signifier : one signified’ and by revealing the complex inclusive, relational and differential nature of ironic meaning-making” (p. 13). The polysemic nature of irony – its indeterminacy – opens up a space to hide. Burwell (2000), in writing about irony and *South Park*, describes how, in the absence of sufficient textual markers that indicate a creator’s attitude toward a particular issue, irony can either be interpreted as “a general apathy or refusal to take anything seriously” or as “polemical and/or sophisticated” – also described as “knowing irony” (p. 6, 7). But as Burwell (2000) asks, “is it possible that under cover of a ‘knowing’ irony, both the ironist and the interpreter can take some kind of pleasure in being able to express [for example, racist] views without censure?” (p. 6). In fact, irony allows *Vice* to broach racism (or what co-founder Gavin McInnes calls “postmodern race irony”) and use ironic inversion to mock a misogynist male porn star without requiring the co-founders to commit to a fixed or stable political orientation. Irony serves a second function for *Vice* because, as Hutcheon (1994) explains, “Unlike metaphor or allegory, which demand similar supplementing of meaning, irony has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who ‘get’ it and those who don’t” (p. 2). This resembles the “edge” described by Curtin & Streeter, an edge that actively limits the audience for a particular text. As Hutcheon (1996) writes, “Unlike metaphor or metonymy, irony has an edge; unlike incongruity or juxtaposition, irony can put people on edge; unlike paradox, irony is decidedly edgy” (p. 37). *Vice*, through its use of irony and edge, sharply demarcates its audience into “those who get it” and “those who don’t.” Hutcheon (1994) believes that the “scene” of irony involves exclusion and inclusion and argues that, “It is less that irony

creates communities, then, than discursive communities make irony possible in the first place” (p. 18). For Hutcheon (1994), discursive communities (a term meant to echo Foucault’s discursive formations) are a “complex configuration of shared knowledge, beliefs, values, and communicative strategies” (p. 91). Like a discursive formation, discursive communities authorize particular interpretations and invalidate and exclude others. Discursive communities also evoke the work of Bourdieu (1984), who writes that, “A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (p. 2). That is, the ability to decode *Vice*’s use of irony is a type of cultural competence. A number of theorists use similar terms to describe cultural competence, including Fiske’s (1991) “discursive competencies” and Fairclough’s (1989) “members’ resources” (p. 58, p. 24).

Evans and Gamman provide linkages between *Vice*’s subcultural terrain and cultural or discursive competencies. In their work on lesbian spectatorship and erotic films, Evans and Gamman (1995) observe that “lesbian viewers may bring certain subcultural experiences and knowledge to the reading of specific texts. This may give these women a different perspective on the erotic images in question” (p. 35). That is, members of a subculture are able to decode lesbian symbolism in mainstream films that other viewers cannot. This ability to decode, and the membership in a discursive community this competence implies, is a source of prestige and status, and generates a feeling of pleasure in the individual. Regina Lewis (2002), writing about the lesbian gaze, observes that “Evans and Gamman emphasize that the pleasure apparently produced by the code under discussion does not reside *in* the representation, but in the activity of decoding it. In other words, it is the act of interpretation itself that is eroticized, driven in

part by the thrill of detecting a lesbian pleasure in the mainstream location” (p. 657).

Lewis describes this ability as *subcultural competencies* (a term Lewis attributes to Evans and Gamman, but a term that appears nowhere in their article). Although Lewis uses subcultural competencies to describe how a marginalized group finds pleasure in a mainstream text, this term should also be applied to how a marginal group successfully decodes marginal or subcultural content. In order to distinguish between Bourdieu’s cultural competence and Lewis’s subcultural competencies, I will use the phrase (sub)cultural competencies to describe the interpretive abilities of *Vice* readers. *Vice* readers possess a related set of discursive and cultural competencies, be it in their ability to “get” the irony of *Vice*, or through the possession of subcultural capital. Thus, *Vice* readers possess the (sub)cultural competencies required to make irony happen, to recognize the connotated messages of the magazine and receive pleasure from such acts of decoding. The pleasure of decoding and interpreting *Vice* encourages readers to remain loyal to the magazine.

A central concern of my thesis involves how these (sub)cultural competencies are acquired and maintained. As Fairclough (1995) argues, “Coherent interpretations of texts are arrived at by interpreters on the basis of cues in the text, and resources (including internalized ideologies and discoursal structures) which they bring to text interpretation” (p. 74). The notion of (sub)cultural competencies demonstrate how *Vice* readers are constituted through discourse. As Featherstone (1991) argues, an investment of time is necessary to acquire cultural competences, along with ongoing expenditure to maintain the competences. *Vice* readers continue investing their time in maintaining subcultural competencies because of the pleasure they receive from inclusion. As Virginia

Nightingale (1996) writes, “The pleasure of the text may reside as much in the delight of being able to participate in the symbolic system of the text as in its personal or social significance” (p. 18). This pleasure is counterbalanced by the effort required to attain and maintain (sub)cultural competencies, a process that evokes Smythe’s audience commodity. In the case of *Vice*, the content of the magazine *and* the pleasure of interpreting it serves as the “free lunch.” As Smythe argues, the free lunch – the content – whets the appetite and helps to “attract and keep [audiences] attending to the program, newspaper, or magazine” (p. 265). The pleasure of interpretation and the exercise of (sub)cultural competencies attracts and retains *Vice* readers while disguising or minimizing the labour component of Smythe’s audience as commodity theory. *Vice* readers are constituted as consuming subjects and as commodities, and for their labour receive payment in pleasure.

In exploring the origins of “hiding in delight” I acknowledge my debt to Hebdige and explain how irony can be used to create a discursive hiding space. I also work through a series of related theories on cultural competence, including Hutcheon (“discursive community”), Fiske (“discursive competencies”) and Fairclough (“member’s resources”). In order to extend these related concepts, I use Evans and Gamman along with Lewis to arrive at the phrase “(sub)cultural competencies.” Such competencies help better explain the relationship between Smythe’s theory of the audience commodity and the pleasure *Vice* readers receive from decoding the content of the magazine. Having explained my methodological and theoretical approaches I will now detail how I researched and categorized the material in *Vice* for analysis.

General Considerations

My analysis of *Vice* starts with the October 1998 (vol. 5 no. 8) issue, the first glossy issue, and continues through to vol. 12 no. 11, the final issue of 2005. *Vice* is still being published, but the research and analysis phase of my thesis began in January 2006, providing a suitable cutoff point. My analysis focuses only on the glossy issues of *Vice* because these years represent a period of rapid transition, experimentation and expansion for the publication. The differences in layout and style between vol. 5 and vol. 8 of the magazine are substantial, whereas the structural differences between vol. 8 and vol. 12 are minimal, since *Vice* solidified its format, content and design by mid-2001.

I analyze a total of 76 issues of *Vice* (I could not locate vol. 8 no. 9, but a significant portion was available for study online at www.viceland.com). I surveyed each issue twice: the initial survey focused on determining if there was sufficient evidence and examples to support theories of rebel consumption, (sub)cultural competencies, irony and subcultural capital. My initial survey confirmed this to be the case, but also revealed other patterns and discursive themes that broadened the scope of the analysis. It became apparent that “edge,” as theorized by Curtin & Streeter, along with the notion of transparency (in the context of *Vice*’s strategy of revealing the behind-the-scenes aspects of magazine publishing) could also be considered. For the second survey of *Vice* issues, I created an index of content (both articles and images) that related to the retention of subcultural capital through disclosure; self-reflexivity regarding the political economy of magazines; irony and its connection to (sub)cultural competencies; the politics of delight; and the use of “anti-fashion spreads,” “anti-ads” and “anti-photographs” in *Vice*.

During my first survey of *Vice* I realized that one of the most vibrant aspects of the magazine was “Vice Mail” (the letters to the editor section). Instances of transparency appear often in this section, but “Vice Mail” also provides a discursive space for the tensions and contradictions of the magazine to be expressed. That *Vice* is willing to print pointed criticism of its economic motives and its transgression of taboos demonstrates the magazine’s self-reflexivity, which Negus (2002) considers a key characteristic of cultural intermediaries. Thus, some of the issues that this thesis explores, including irony, (sub)cultural competencies, and subcultural capital were also raised in the pages of “Vice Mail.” This self-reflexive tendency complicates analysis, although *Vice*’s frequent use of “the reveal” ultimately makes it another strategy in the magazine’s discursive arsenal. Whenever possible, I have selected articles or images that dramatize *Vice*’s strategies and ideologies. Most of selected texts generated responses in “Vice Mail” and some of those letters engendered a response from the editor of *Vice*. What differentiates the sequence of *article or image* → *letter to editor* → *editor’s response* from a typical newspaper or magazine is *Vice*’s willingness to publish letters that address the magazine’s position within the circuit of culture. Similarly, many of the notes from the editor respond in kind. That *Vice* is able to imbed the ongoing narrative of reader critique and corresponding use of “the reveal” within the pages of the magazine also differentiates their discursive formation from more traditional publications.

Undertaking two separate surveys of *Vice* allowed me to better isolate relevant themes, trends and discursive patterns in the magazine. An analysis of *Vice*’s self-reflexivity has helped identify the subcultural contradictions of the magazine, at the same time adding an extra layer of interpretative complexity. Finally, a focus on “Vice Mail”

provides one route to consider identity and consumption in relation to reader reception of the magazine.

Conclusion

I have used this chapter to argue for the validity and relevance of combining Foucault and Fairclough in a critical discourse analysis. Foucault's model helps identify *Vice*'s rules of formation, which will be used in Chapter Four to detail interpretations the magazine's discursive formation omits, disallows and invalidates. Fairclough, meanwhile, with his belief that discourse is constitutive, further illuminates the role of (sub)cultural competencies and the audience commodity. My discussion of Hall and Sekula in relation to visual analysis justifies how critical discourse analysis can be used with images and text. In order to address Philips & Jorgensen's concerns regarding the appropriateness of theory used in critical discourse analysis, I have created the metaphor of "hiding in delight." As the next two chapters will demonstrate, the metaphor of hiding in delight provides a way to isolate and scrutinize a variety of otherwise unrelated texts in *Vice*.

Chapter Four: Textual Strategies

Intro

Using the framework of critical discourse analysis described in Chapter Three, in conjunction with the metaphor of “hiding in delight,” I will explore the political and ideological motivations driving *Vice*’s strategies of disclosure, irony and inversion – along with the magazine’s politics of pleasure. I begin with *Vice*’s use of disclosure and self-reflexiveness. By revealing to readers how it polices the border between the mainstream and the underground, *Vice* is able to retain subcultural capital. For related reasons, *Vice* reveals the political economy of publishing a magazine, informing readers about the mechanics of subscriptions and Reader’s Polls. *Vice*’s use of disclosure creates a dialogue with readers that makes it possible to constitute readers as consuming subjects without their awareness. Another strategy is the use of irony, which is related to (sub)cultural competencies, since those who fail to “get” *Vice*’s irony are punished through public ridicule to remind readers of the exclusionary aspects of irony. The indeterminacy of irony also provides the co-founders of *Vice* with a discursive space in which to hide. Through inversion and the world upside down – a term which refers to illustrations appearing in medieval European broadsheets that reversed positions of social dominance and subservience – the slippery nature of irony is demonstrated, helping to explain how letters in “Vice Mail” arrive at conflicting interpretations of *Vice*’s political motivations. Then, through a detailed analysis of an issue of the magazine I call “*Vice* Upside Down,” I illuminate the logic of subcultural capital and the (sub)cultural competencies required to decode *Vice*. I conclude by looking at the politics of delight and

in doing so I return to Hebdige's theories of pleasure. Through Oliver Marchart, I challenge the belief that subcultures are intrinsically subversive, while using Dean MacCannell and Lawrence Grossberg to help illuminate *Vice*'s postmodern politics. I conclude with an example of the co-founders of *Vice* attempting to contain and police a competing political discourse. Through an examination of the collision of two incompatible discourses, I uncover some of the rules governing *Vice*'s discursive formation, along with what type of statements *Vice*'s rules of formation allow and disallow.

Retaining Subcultural Capital Through Disclosure

While examining eight years of *Vice* issues, I discovered numerous examples of explicit repositioning and readjustment of subcultural capital. In a record review of an album by Fatboy Slim in vol. 5 no. 9, Gavin McInnes writes, "Unfortunately, by the time we got a Fatboy Slim interview he was all over *Spin* magazine and we couldn't do it [couldn't publish the interview]. That doesn't mean we don't love him" (p. 85). That McInnes makes the logic behind the retention of subcultural capital explicit is unique to *Vice*. Heath (2001) describes this type of reasoning as a "comparative preference structure – the good is disliked because too many others enjoy it. It therefore fails to express distinction" (p. 15). The absence of an interview with Fatboy Slim is not sufficient, as the implied reader requires *Vice* to explicitly acknowledge its ability to negotiate the ever-shifting border between the mainstream media and the underground. Through this review, McInnes provides a peek into the magazine's decision-making process. In a similar way, in vol. 8 no. 5, a letter in Vice Mail asks why the magazine

isn't writing about the band N.E.R.D. *Vice* replies that, "We wanted to do something on N.E.R.D. but people like *The Face* did it to death MONTHs before the album came out Other people we dig but couldn't write about because they were overdone include: The Strokes, Mogwai and Ladytron" (p. 29). Once again, *Vice* reassures its readers that the aforementioned artists were omitted by choice, not by accident, explaining these intentional absences in the language of subcultural capital. The self-reflexive nature of these asides demonstrate that subcultural capital, like hegemony, involves a process of constant negotiation.

A final example of *Vice*'s strategy of disclosure can be seen in vol. 10, no. 9 of *Vice Mail*, through the following letter:

Can't Sell Out

Dear Suroosh,

Ann Moore passed along your package on *Vice* Magazine. While I am a fan (knew about *Vice* via one of my kids), it won't work for Time Inc.: too edgy for our mainstream advertisers, too likely to get chunked out of Wal-Mart (where we make one-third of our newsstand sales). Many thanks for sending along, best of luck.

Yours Sincerely,

Isolde Motley

Corporate Editor, Time Inc. (p. 26).

Because the co-founders of *Vice* have a history of pranking both journalists and readers it is difficult to ascertain the veracity of the letter, although Isolde Motley was employed by

Time Inc. at the time the letter was published. Regardless, the letter reinforces the work of Curtin and Streeter by demonstrating how an investment in “edge” limits circulation, advertising revenue and readership. The letter also lends credence to *Vice* co-founder Shane Smith and his contention that *Vice* would have been unable to publish its images and content if it received newsstand distribution. The purpose of reprinting this letter is not initially apparent, however. Why would *Vice* provide proof to their readers that the co-founders had considered selling the magazine to a large corporate entity representing the antithesis of *Vice*’s business model and editorial mandate? The answer can be found in Time Inc.’s refusal. In playing this game of chicken, *Vice* risks losing subcultural capital. But after attempting to sell out and being denied, *Vice* uses the rejection to save face and suggest that their surfeit of “edge” prevented them from being subsumed by a mainstream magazine publisher.

Categorizing musicians as overexposed, and demonstrating that *Vice* is too edgy for a mainstream media company involve a significant degree of transparency. The use of “the reveal”—that is, discursively demonstrating the unspoken rules governing subcultural capital—serves to flatter and reassure magazine readers. In so doing, *Vice* reminds readers that it is actively negotiating and maintaining subcultural capital.

Disclosing the Political Economy of Magazines

Related to the transparency *Vice* employs to maintain subcultural capital is the use of behind-the-scenes descriptions of the magazine industry. The political economy literature on magazines in Chapter Two helps provide necessary context in this regard. *Vice* uses transparency to address and defuse reader perceptions that advertisers influence

the content of *Vice*. In vol. 6 no. 6, a two page Reader's Poll features a rambling introduction that observes,

When most magazines ask you to fill out a survey, they use the information for two things. The first is to pander their magazine to the tastes of the people lame enough to fill out these forms and mail them in, thus ruining it for the loyal, yet apathetic, readers. The second is to show advertisers things like: "Look at this! Chinese women with moles who like fashion and movies are crazy about us. If you advertise your clothes and films in our rag, you'll be reaching your target audience!"

But none of our advertisers ask for any of that. (p. 98)

This casual, dismissive tone evokes a frank, conversational style, a mode of address that creates the appearance of a dialogue between reader and editor. In the same way that *Vice* uses "the reveal" to retain subcultural capital, this introduction serves to pull the reader aside and explain how the business of magazines works. In doing so, *Vice* mocks traditional magazines that are beholden to advertisers, reinforcing the magazine's subcultural "otherness." This tone helps elide the fact that a Reader's Poll will assist *Vice* in determining the contours of the audience as commodity. That is, despite the self-reflexivity that *Vice* is displaying in this text, this Reader's Poll will be used to compile demographic information on the magazine, meaning that the justifications provided for the inclusion of this reader survey are contradictory. In other words, if *Vice*'s advertisers do not seek demographic information, there is no reason to conduct a reader's poll. But the 2006 *Vice* Media Kit demonstrates that *Vice* advertisers do ask for specific

information about *Vice*'s audience. Page four of the Media Kit offers a complete breakdown of *Vice* readers, including their loyalty to the publication, their trendsetting tendencies and their shopping habits – indicated by the headline “*Vice* Readers Are Big-Time Consumers.” Thus, *Vice* readers *are* constituted as consumers, despite reassurances to the contrary.

The introduction to the Reader's Poll shows how *Vice* uses transparency to mask and diminish the poll's purpose. It is an apology mixed with transparency designed to speak to readers who know that Reader's Polls are part of the business of publishing a magazine. The tone and transparency creates an imaginary dialogue where the tensions and contradictions of profiting from underground culture can be “magically resolved.” In turn, this dialogue between reader and publisher provides *Vice* with room to maneuver, a space to hide. This strategy is reminiscent of the final sentence of Horkheimer & Adorno's (1972) chapter “The Culture Industry,” from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which they write, “The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even through they see through them” (p. 167). As long as *Vice* readers are reminded that their (sub)cultural competencies allow them to see through the purpose of the survey, they are not bothered by its inclusion. Providing evidence of self-reflexivity is sufficient to overcome the contradictions created by the inclusion of the Reader's Poll.

When the poll results are announced in vol. 6 no. 9, *Vice* includes a photograph of a survey that has been defaced with the words YOU SUCK !! written in black marker (p. 62). (Appendix A.) This strategy of integrating reader criticism into the discursive narrative serves as a pressure valve. Allowing magazine readers to criticize the magazine

once again demonstrates *Vice*'s reflexivity and strengthens the illusion of a dialogue between magazine and reader. In an attempt to simultaneously acknowledge and alleviate the tension created by including a Reader's Poll, the publishers of the magazine observe that,

There were about 2,500 responses so we decided to sell the list to one of those junk mail companies for big money. After seeing the resulting pie charts however, the company decided our research was "unmarketable and irrelevant," leaving us with nothing but the realization that our livelihood depends on the adoration of a bunch of psychos. (vol. 6 no. 9, p. 62)

In this way, *Vice* acknowledges the business purpose of the Reader's Poll while simultaneously suggesting that *Vice* readers are beyond commodification. This teeter-totter between tension and relief resembles the decision to publish the Time Inc. letter that informed *Vice* its content could not be profitably integrated into a major corporation. Through this display of irreverence, *Vice* implies that their readership possesses sufficient "edge" to prevent them from becoming a consumer profile or target.

Another example of political economic disclosure appears in "Vice Mail," when a reader in vol. 9 no. 5 complains that a record label called DFA has been receiving too much positive coverage in *Vice*. This prompts the writer to ask, "Is it a coincidence that *Vice* Magazine sponsored the DFA show last month and that DFA advertises in your magazine? Then suddenly there is a glowing article about a label that hasn't released a full-length record yet?" (p. 26). This letter provides proof that readers are aware that advertising influences the editorial content of magazines. *Vice*'s editor explains that "The

paltry fee we get from DFA ads isn't enough to buy editorial. You need over \$10,000 for that kind of pull. We honestly think they are the best new label out there and if you wait a little bit you'll see why" (vol. 9 no. 5, p. 26). With the first sentence of the reply, the editor suggests that *Vice* is no different from other magazines, except for the fact they appear open and honest about the influence of advertising. Having leveraged the strategy of transparency, the response proceeds to affirm the magazine's subcultural capital, assuring their readership that the praise DFA is receiving is warranted.

A final example of *Vice*'s behind-the-scenes strategy involves subscriptions. In vol. 7 no. 2, the magazine informs readers that, "To get a subscription to *Vice* Magazine all we need is the price of the stamp and like, a buck for labour. Don't send cash" (p. 96). This statement provides a clear, unadorned description of how to procure the magazine, although the use of "and like, a buck" can be read as an apology or hedge for charging for a subscription to a free magazine. In vol. 8 no. 1, an ad for subscriptions features the tagline "More ads on your doorstep!" (p. 74). This tagline flatters the (sub)cultural competencies of *Vice* readers and acknowledges that one of the purposes of the magazine is to deliver targeting advertising to readers. However, it is not until vol. 8 no. 4 that a *Vice*-specific strategy toward subscriptions is articulated. Instead of soliciting subscriptions, or poking fun at themselves, *Vice* offers the following information, under the headline "Please Do Not Subscribe To *Vice*":

Most magazines want to up their subscription rates because that's what investors and shareholders look at when they evaluate the company. That's why you get all kinds of deals when you subscribe. Most of the time the magazine is losing money. We have a whole different business model. We are free. That means

100% pick up rate, and, subsequently, we don't care who subscribes. In fact, subscriptions are a pain in the ass. If you insist we will do it for the cost of shipping (plus a dollar for handling) but in a lot of ways it's like "whatever," you know what we're saying? (p. 124)

This tone is almost identical to the tone deployed in the Reader's Poll, and the use of casual language ("pain in the ass"; "whatever") once again evokes a frank, conversational style of address. Through the use of "the reveal," *Vice* restates how they differ from a traditional magazine, reinscribing their subcultural capital. This text has run in *Vice* ever since, with only a slight alteration to include the magazine's website. It represents the apex of how *Vice* uses disclosure to serve the magazine. If subscriptions are unnecessary to the economic mandate of *Vice*, then the magazine should stop offering them, in the same way that if *Vice* advertisers don't require demographic information, then there is no need to conduct a Reader's Poll. The magazine offers subscriptions because it is profitable to do so, and a Reader's Poll helps the magazine determine what rates to charge for advertising. Stableford (2005), writing in *Folio* magazine reports that by the spring of 2005, *Vice* had 20,000 subscribers, despite the magazine's attempts to the contrary. By revealing how the magazine industry operates, *Vice* encourages their readers to "see through" the purpose of the Reader's Poll and subscriptions. But as the 20,000 *Vice* subscribers and the 2,500 poll respondents indicate, disclosure also grants the reader permission to participate, secure in the knowledge that their (sub)cultural competencies will protect them from the effects of these constituting mechanisms.

Irony and (sub)cultural competencies

The tagline for a full-page Viceland.com ad in vol. 7 no. 3 reads “They don’t get any of it” (p. 11). This statement recalls Shawn Phelan, *Vice*’s Canadian Director of Marketing, who told *Marketing* magazine that “[*Vice*’s content is] not for you to understand. Your average brand manager is not part of this demographic” (as quoted in Powell, 2004, p. 7). The tagline also evokes Hutcheon’s (1994) argument about the evaluative edge of irony, which divides audiences into “those who ‘get’ it and those who don’t” (p. 2). The advertisement features a photograph of an African-American man whose mouth and lips appear distended and distorted. He is holding a blank sign above his head. Near the top of the page is a list of cutting-edge clothing, shoe, music and videogame companies, with the implication that products from these companies are for sale through Viceland.com. (Appendix B.) The phrase “They don’t get any of it” is thoroughly constitutive, as it reminds *Vice* readers of the exclusivity of the magazine’s discursive community. Only those possessing the requisite (sub)cultural competencies can decipher the significance of the list of brands in the advertisement. Through the word “they,” this ad makes reference to mainstream consumers, against whom *Vice* defines itself. Unlike mainstream consumers, *Vice* readers have learned to “consume appropriately and with natural ease in every situation” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 17). The pleasure of inclusion this ad fosters helps disguise the fact that readers of the magazine are in this advertisement being constituted as a demographic of refined consumers.

Vice reinforces the pleasure of (sub)cultural competencies by mocking those unable to make irony “happen,” and spotlighting those excluded from participating in *Vice*’s delight. For example, vol. 6 no. 10 features an article by *Vice* co-founder Gavin

McInnes entitled “The New Blues,” an interview with a 78-year-old blues guitarist named T-Model Ford. In the article’s introduction, McInnes claims that Mick Jagger and Robert Plant invented the blues: “T-Model Ford and his friends ... are doing a form of American blues called ‘Blues Music’ that is just as good (if not better) than the British original” (p. 83). Here, irony is used to underscore how the black originators of blues music remain overshadowed by the success of white musicians who borrowed and stole from the genre’s pioneers. The Letter of the Month in “Vice Mail” in vol. 7 no. 3 is from a reader who failed to recognize or “get” McInnes’s irony. McInnes, responds in part by asking, “What are you taking in University, Not-Getting-Jokes 101?” (p. 23). Those unable to correctly interpret irony are mocked by the magazine’s co-founder, providing a source of delight for those who “get it.” The indeterminacy of irony is used as a way to patrol the border between those who get it, and those who do not get any of it. For a short time during 2001 (volume 8), the magazine included a “Don’t Get It” section in “Vice Mail” that identified readers whose irony radar had malfunctioned. In doing so, *Vice* clarifies its use of irony for a specific reason – to reinforce the inclusive and exclusive nature of irony and (sub)cultural competencies.

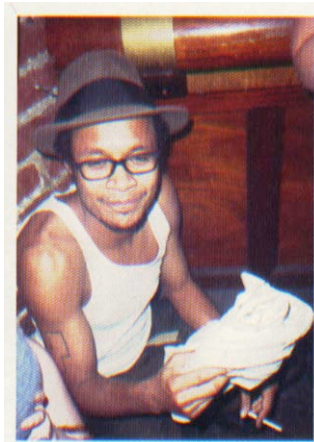
Vice also combines reader criticism with irony. Not only does the magazine publish criticism within its pages, but on occasion it incorporates this criticism into its content. In vol. 7 no. 1 of “Vice Mail,” a reader attacks the magazine by writing that “Your fashion DOs & DON’Ts have become lame and stale, dictated by the many clothing companies that make-up your budget, the articles while once fresh and innovative, now appear crude and purely shock-driven” (p. 23). “DOs & DON’Ts” is one of the most popular features of the magazine, a series of photographs that enact the

semiotics of subcultural capital, where style and fashion judgments are delivered in a normative, prescriptive fashion. A representative DON'T can be seen in vol. 8 no. 3 (p. 62):



Just so we're all on the same page here, this Vancouver artisan has painted (grown man by the way), has painted (hand painted) lightning, mountains and a whale on his back. A whale.

A representative DO can be seen in vol. 8 no. 4 (p. 65):



Fedoras are really hard to pull off. Most of the time you end up looking like a foppish nerd who wants to solve crimes and be invisible. The only way you can pull it off is to be a stoned, bad ass nice guy with weird tattoos and something really important to do later on, like this guy.

The letter complaining about advertiser influence in “DOs & DON’Ts” represents a serious accusation about the integrity of *Vice*’s subcultural capital. The authority implied by the tone and style of the above captions would be thrown into question by the influence of advertising. In response, the “Vice Fashion” spread in vol. 7 no. 1 – the very same issue in which the complaint letter appears – incorporates this critique. (Appendix C). Each image in “Vice Fashion” resembles an oversized DO, with captions that include frequent and obvious references to the clothing companies that advertise in *Vice*. Through the use of irony, *Vice* addresses the critique without denying or affirming the influence of advertising. A letter in “Vice Mail” (vol. 7 no. 2) reads,

That fashion shoot was fucking hilarious. You realize however, that nobody is going to get it. As with the blues article where you said the blues was invented by Brits and people got angry, people are going to get equally angry when they see your fashion shoot. Though you printed the letter where they say DOs is fake the type is small and I seriously doubt people [are] going to read it. Keep on [tricking] us. (p. 23)

The fake DOs in vol. 7 no. 1 combine irony with transparency in order to domesticate complaints while providing space for the magazine to “hide.” The mock DOs demonstrate that *Vice* does not normally insert ham-fisted references to specific clothing labels, but does not address the fact that the very inclusion of fashion images and commentary help create an editorial environment conducive to fashion advertising. This strategy provides *Vice* the opportunity to address critics of the magazine, while creating enough ironic indeterminacy to obscure or avoid more serious critiques of advertiser

influence. The centrality of indeterminacy is shown whenever the magazine is forced to blunt the edge of irony. In vol. 12 no. 8, an article entitled “Parent Killers” describes how to dispose of a corpse without getting caught, and includes an editor’s note that reads, in part:

We don’t know how this could more clearly be a joke for us, but our lawyer thinks we could get in trouble if we don’t say it. So, readers, listen very carefully. This is a fucking joke. Don’t kill your parents, or anyone else, and don’t chop up their bodies. We are just riffing around with you here. Be good. (p. 54)

This disclaimer removes the tension and the edge of irony the article requires; the joke is over before it begins. This disclaimer, through its very existence, acknowledges that “they” might not get it. As a letter in vol. 11 no. 4 observes, in response to the repeated use of Nazi imagery in the “DO’s & DON’Ts” section of the magazine,

What you seem to be missing is that your entirely impressionable readership demographic ... is not gonna get your irony. Especially when your irony is entirely inconsistent. ... You guys make a living out of feeding “cool” to your readers, but simply wipe your hands clean of any responsibility associated with your actions. (p. 26)

This letter addresses another important aspect of *Vice*’s use of irony. The inconsistent deployment of irony by *Vice* removes the ability of the receiver to ground the speaker. As Hutcheon (1994) points out, “Irony removes the security that words mean only what they say. So too does lying, of course, and that is why the ethical as well as the political are

never far beneath the surface in discussions of the use of and responses to irony” (p. 14). Inconsistency allows *Vice* to address symbolically various political and ethical contradictions while retaining subcultural capital and a space to hide. As Hutcheon (1994) argues, “There is nothing *intrinsically* subversive about ironic skepticism There is no *necessary* relationship between irony and radical politics ... Irony has often been used to reinforce rather than to question established attitudes” (p. 10). Because irony can be used to achieve opposing purposes, it is necessary to try and determine *Vice*’s political grounding.

Irony and “The World upside Down”

Inversion and the world upside down are literary and visual techniques that rely on the use of irony. As Diane Christian (1978) observes, “Inversion is familiar in literature. Satire and irony derive generic definition from the play of symbolic inversion, and tragedy and comedy employ reversals, transgressions, and partial inversions of order” (p. 117). Barbara Babcock, meanwhile, (1978) observes that “Symbolic inversion is central to the literary notion of irony, parody, and paradox” (p. 16). In vol. 7 no. 7, *Vice* experiments with inversion when interviewer Dylan Evans treats a male porn star named Max Hardcore as if he were an enlightened feminist scholar, when in fact Hardcore specializes in acts of extreme on-screen misogyny:

[Q:] So you’re not about objectifying women. You are about creating a fantasy land devoid of societal constructs and moral obligations, a libidinous land of imaginary role playing perhaps?

[A:] Objectify. Dehumanize. That's the goal. You see, our goal is to make dirty fucking movies, y'know, not politically correct stuff. We make dirty goddamn movies. Our goal is to completely remove any shred of socially redeeming value that it may have. Same goes for scientific value. (p. 129)

The juxtaposition of the scholarly language used in the question with Hardcore's crude and ungrammatical response ("We make dirty goddamn movies") serve as textual markers designed to signal *Vice* readers that the interview subject is being mocked. Despite such discursive cues, the article provokes a number of angry letters. In response to one such letter from Josephine Jansen in vol. 7 no. 10, *Vice* replies "Geez, could that joke have been more obvious? We wrote her back and tried to explain that it was like interviewing an inbred hillbilly and treating him like he was a rocket scientist" (p. 27). But this explanation does not satisfy the letter writer, and Jansen writes another letter, observing that "Making a mockery of sexism is to ignore the seriousness of the situation" (p. 27). Reinforcing this idea is a letter in vol. 7 no. 9 which states, "I know you think you made fun of him [Hardcore] and you were doing us all a service but by giving him the forum to spout his misogynist hate speech you aren't doing anyone any good" (p. 27). These letters highlight the problems with inversion and the slipperiness of *Vice*'s irony. As David Kunzle (1978) explains, "The essential ambivalence of WUD ["world upside down"] permits, according to circumstances, those satisfied with the existing or traditional social order to see the theme as a mockery of the idea of changing that order around, and at the same time, those dissatisfied with that order to see the theme as mocking it in its present, perverted state" (p. 82). Given *Vice*'s frequent examples of

ironic and unironic sexism (hence, inconsistent irony), it is difficult to ascertain the magazine's position on gender relations. As the letters to "Vice Mail" indicate, inverting Max Hardcore provides the reader with enough latitude to interpret, or misinterpret the ironic intent.

There are many other examples of inversion in *Vice*, including an article in vol. 12 no. 1 that features graphic photos of dead (and decapitated) Iraqis juxtaposed with an awkward interview about the sex life of the American soldier who took the photos. However, the most dramatic example of inversion occurs in vol. 11 no. 9, when the entire issue is inverted. I will analyze this issue, which I describe as "*Vice Upside Down*," in depth because it illustrates many of theories and discursive strategies that I raise, including the notion of the audience as commodity, the construction of irony, and theories of cultural intermediaries and (sub)cultural competencies. By inverting itself, *Vice* reveals and reinforces many of the unspoken editorial and subcultural assumptions that buttress the magazine. Taken together, the inversions in the issue of "*Vice Upside Down*" offer a clear explanation of what *Vice* is not. In doing so, "*Vice Upside Down*" provides an opportunity to reverse engineer the content of *Vice*, in the process creating a roadmap of the (sub)cultural competencies required to navigate the magazine and the variegated strategies *Vice* uses to retain subcultural capital. In this way, "*Vice Upside Down*" serves as a Rosetta Stone that can be used to help decipher the magazine.

The most obvious inversion in "*Vice Upside Down*" is the constant celebrity worship. The cover features a photograph of singer Michael Jackson and guitarist Dave Navarro performing together, musicians who will be described by the editor of *Vice* two issues later (vol. 11 no. 11) as the "worst people on earth" (p. 34). The abundance of

celebrities in “*Vice* Upside Down” serves to remind the reader that *Vice* avoids discussing celebrity culture in order to position itself in opposition to mainstream magazines. In a related decision, the cover of “*Vice* Upside Down” is overlaid with meaningless teaser text for various articles, including “Denim: The New Cotton?” These teasers are meant to mock fashion and music magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Spin*, whose magazine covers are filled with taglines designed to entice newsstand readers into buying a copy of the publication. *Vice* normally uses small, discrete cover lines, and so, for example, the cover of vol. 7, no. 2 featured the following text: “Rock Stars • Porn • Rap Snacks • Torture.”² In drawing attention to *Vice*’s lack of teaser text, the magazine conveys how aesthetic considerations, not commercial considerations, appear to dictate the design of *Vice* covers.

As befitting an issue of “*Vice* Upside Down,” the entire magazine has been redesigned. The Table of Contents utilizes an over-the-top graffiti-inspired font, and its size and prominence indicate an exaggerated attempt at conveying “edge.” (Appendix D). As Thornton (1996) writes, “Both cultural and subcultural capital put a premium on the ‘second nature’ of their knowledges. Nothing depletes capital more than the sight of someone trying too hard” (p. 12). The clean, simple layout of *Vice* has been replaced with a very busy design with numerous boxes and circles around articles, a technique magazine professionals refer to as “packaging.” There are numerous other examples of “trying too hard” throughout the issue, including a letter from the editor meant to mock men’s magazines such as *Details* or *GQ*. The letter talks about the latest trends, writing,

² Along with offering a concise yet astonishingly accurate summary of *Vice*’s editorial fixations, these four taglines resemble a successful exercise in surrealist juxtaposition. One is reminded of Lautreamont’s phrase, “Beautiful like the chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table.”

“How hot is poker right now? You practically get a third-degree burn when you pick up the cards. So it’s no wonder that *Vice* is right there on the front lines of today’s extreme poker scene – introducing you to the movers and the shakers” (p. 34). This self-congratulatory tone is used to point out that mainstream magazines write about trends only after they have attained a critical mass of popularity, whereas *Vice* stops writing about musicians or trends the moment they become too popular. Other elements of “*Vice Upside Down*” demonstrate the degree to which *Vice* has constituted its readers, especially through “Vice Fashion” and “DOs and DON’Ts,” which help readers identify a subculturally appropriate aesthetic. For example, without an ability to recognize *Vice*-specific style codes, the Guerrilla Makeover featured in “*Vice Upside Down*” cannot be decoded. (Appendix E.) In the Guerilla Makeover, a woman named Desiree is criticized for wearing clothing that the ideal reader recognizes as *Vice*-approved and is given expensive new clothing, a new hairstyle and makeup that both imitate and mock how mainstream fashion “tries too hard.” Without the requisite codes and (sub)cultural competencies, the reader is unable to interpret this inversion.

A final unique inversion is the upside down fashion shoot. “Vice Fashion” layouts do not typically include prices for any of the items displayed, and the textual placement of clothing brands and labels are minimized in both size and location. The strategy of inversion in “Vice Fashion” produces a completely annotated fashion shoot. (Appendix F.) The name brand of every article of clothing or fashion accessory worn by the two male models is indicated with an arrow and a large white circle a few centimeters away from the actual item in question. Each circle also contains the item’s price, and a corresponding website. The intent of this inversion is to make the link between

consumption and style as explicit as possible, in a manner similar to the fake DOs fashion shoot in vol. 7 no. 1. As Steinem (1990) argues, the inclusion of fashion spreads in a magazine is designed to provide a “supportive editorial atmosphere” for the clothing companies that advertising in any given magazine (p. 18). By creating a “Vice Fashion” spread that resembles a clothing catalogue, the editors of *Vice* are reminding readers that, unlike other magazines, it is not beholden to its clothing advertisers.

Taken together, these examples of inversion demonstrate that *Vice* readers perform labour, as conceived by Smythe, who refers to “the work which audience members perform” by reading a magazine or watching television (p. 266). Intertextual references to past issues of *Vice* abound. The more familiar the reader is with the conventions of *Vice*, the more they are able to exercise their (sub)cultural competencies, and the more pleasure they receive from reading this issue. “*Vice* Upside Down” dramatizes the extent to which *Vice* readers are constituted through discourse. To decode the issue requires thorough knowledge of not only *Vice*, but the layout, conventions and editorial focus of the mainstream magazines mocked in the issue. In this way, “*Vice* Upside Down” suggests that (sub)cultural competencies necessitate a working knowledge of both mainstream and underground magazine codes and conventions.

Predictably, not everyone “got” this issue. A letter in vol. 11 no. 11 writes, “I thought *Vice* hated the manufactured celebrity and celebrated the common-man celebrity? ... Where is the sarcasm? Where is the wit? Where is the black humour? Where is the street journalism? This didn’t read like an edgy Gen X publication” (p. 34). This letter offers further proof of the labour *Vice* readers perform. Although the letter writer misinterprets the intent of “*Vice* Upside Down,” he is still able to identify correctly the

components that were absent, including the lack of “edge.” Another letter reads, in part, “I feel bad ripping you apart, but when it comes to bad design I can’t help but take it personally. I mean, you’re *Vice* and you have so much potential to make the hottest-looking magazine out there, but you took a massive leap backwards” (p. 34). The response to these complaint letters begins,

Dear FUCKING idiots,

Let’s just have a look at the first few pages of our 100th Anniversary Issue:

- It says ‘The Worst Piece of Shit Ever’ on the cover

[...]

- Several articles on the cover do not exist: Bjork on p. 260, The Kids Are All Right p. 197

- The contributors page lists people that aren’t in the magazine, people who, in fact, do not even exist.... (p. 34, boldface in original).

The editor continues to list additional textual markers that were inserted to make *Vice*’s intent clear. The angry tone of the response, as indicated through choice of language and the use of boldface and uppercase, conveys a significant amount of frustration. This anger differs significantly from the typically bemused tone that took delight in ironic misinterpretations. The editor appears angry that anyone could think *Vice* capable of such a reversal of editorial mandate and complete evacuation of subcultural capital. Perhaps the editor is tired that after 10 years of publishing the magazine, “They still don’t get any of it.” The assumed sophistication of *Vice*’s ideal reader is undermined when regular readers of the magazine are unable to accrue the necessary (sub)cultural competencies.

Through “*Vice* Upside Down” the reader learns what *Vice* is not. It is anti-celebrity, it does not draw attention to its subcultural knowledge and it avoids “packaging” and other design-heavy strategies of more commercial magazines. But the problem with a definition generated through negation is that it remains unclear what *Vice* might stand for politically when it uses inversion to describe a misogynist porn star.

The Politics of Delight

In “Vice Mail” vol. 11 no. 3, in a reply to a letter supporting the magazine’s right to be offensive, the editor writes,

Vice has a religious dedication to having no dedications. When we make fun of the right they don’t notice because they don’t read *Vice*. When we make fun of the left everyone has a heart attack and says we’re right. The only thing we are consistent about is that George Bush ... has to go. Everything else changes daily.
(p. 30)

This political irreverence can be understood as a response to the relativism and contingency fostered by postmodernism. In *Empty Meeting Grounds*, Dean MacCannell (1992) argues that “the postmodern subject is positioned beyond the distinction between the political left and right, which are seen as equally coercive and corrupt” (p. 218). MacCannell (1992) goes on to argue that “A conscious or unconscious understanding of the postmodern ethos permits its adherents to flip off the new left and the yuppie right” (p. 221). MacCannell offers one way of considering *Vice*’s non-politics. Another method

of considering *Vice*'s politics of delight can be found in vol. 7 no. 6. After describing *Vice* as a "guilty pleasure," a "Vice Mail" letter observes that,

While *Vice* magazine and its creators seem to operate from within a total moral vacuum, you seem to have found in this the great daring (or just, perhaps, chemically-induced imitation) to be unabashedly honest about this. You people have no shame, and no need to lie about your own dirty little fascinations ... Since you lack any ideology outside of hipster nihilism, putting sleazy skatewear ads and the very personal descriptions of rape victims right next to each other doesn't confuse or disconcert you in the least. (p. 31)

This letter challenges the active, reflexive role that Negus accords to cultural intermediaries. *Vice*'s strategy of disclosure, especially as it relates to the political economy of publishing, highlights the co-founder's position within the circuit of culture. Through the use of "the reveal," *Vice*'s co-founders ascribe agency to their role as producers. But the content of *Vice* does not support a consistent, progressive politics. That is, *Vice* takes advantage of the fact that as producers, they wield agency, despite the fact that this agency does not necessarily translate into a political mandate that challenges the status quo. As a letter in "Vice Mail" vol. 11 no. 1 asks, "Can't *Vice* try to expand its subversion of unoriginal, homophobic, mainstream culture to include a subversion of racism?" (p. 26). This letter speaks to *Vice*'s failed potential in its position as cultural intermediary. du Gay's diagram of the circuit of culture reinforces the links between consumption and representation, along with production and representation. The above letter recognizes that *Vice* has the opportunity subvert racism, and through this complaint

the gap between promise and expectation is revealed. The slippery nature of irony causes some readers to struggle with the contradictions and indeterminacies in *Vice*. The indiscriminate politics of the co-founders of *Vice* are thrown into sharper relief when juxtaposed against a more forceful expression of political sentiment. In vol. 8 no. 3, writer Bruce LaBruce follows around a crew of New York graffiti artists. His comments about the politics of transgression are worth quoting at length:

As a Canadian in the land of the Yanks, the ascent of the Texas travesty [George W. Bush declaring war on Iraq] unfolding before our eyes is stirring up my old political punk leanings, but strangely I will soon discover that Ryan [McGinley, a *Vice* photographer] and the graffiti kids he will be photographing, despite their radical pursuits and flagrant disregard for the law ... are surprisingly apolitical. The only thing they seem to want to boycott is talking to me seriously about graffiti. Nikes, new or vintage, are ubiquitous amongst the crew (what sweatshops?) and any conversation regarding the motivation behind spraypainting is devoid of any specific political or even anarchistic socialist rhetoric. Sure they often destroy mass media billboards and mall-like chains, but it's not adusting. (p. 39)

LaBruce, a regular contributor to *Vice*, appears genuinely surprised that *Vice*'s subcultural muses lack a political orientation. LaBruce's editorializing echoes Hebdige's (1988) belief that the consumer has replaced the citizen, and the pleasure-seeking bricoleur has replaced the rational Enlightenment subject. Hebdige (1988) writes that "The now replaces history," while LaBruce concludes the aforementioned discussion on

the apolitical nature of transgression by observing that, “Things are so fucked up at this point in history, so monumentally surreal, that *only the impulsive moment counts*, the rush of adrenaline garnered from racking or tagging, the natural high” (p. 166, p. 39, emphasis added). Both Hebdige and LaBruce conclude that there can be no politics for those who live moment by moment. At the same time, Hebdige explicitly connects pleasure and politics. In a discussion about how media coverage of youth culture vacillates between praising the consumptive elements of spectacular subcultures and demonizing political protests and riots, Hebdige (1988) argues that, “‘Politics’ and ‘pleasure,’ crime and resistance, transgression and carnival are meshed and confounded” (p. 34). Hebdige (1988) believes that style can be subversive and pleasure can have material consequences. Describing a series of photographs of various subcultures, Hebdige (1988) asserts that, “I want to challenge [the] distinction between ‘pleasure’ and ‘politics,’ between ‘advertisements’ and ‘documentaries’ and to pose instead another concept: the politics of pleasure” (p. 19). The problem is there is no binding mechanism that links pleasure and politics together, as LaBruce demonstrates. Marchart (2003), in trying to define a post-subculturalist politics, argues that, “It is imperative to take issue with the ‘heroic’ or romantic idea according to which the subordinate cultural groups act subversively or counter-hegemonically simply by virtue of their subordinate position. There is no intrinsic resistant or subversive quality to subcultures” (p. 85). Marchart insinuates that the affective aspects of subculture, the romantic and heroic overtones associated with hiding in the shadows of the mainstream are difficult to extinguish. For Fiske, subordinate cultural groups are inherently subversive and oppositional. But *Vice* demonstrates otherwise, and as Marchart (2003) explains, “while the heroic ideology of

subculture plays with the inventory of political terms like ‘resistance,’ ‘subversion,’ and so forth, in most cases there is no politics in subcultural ‘politics’” (p. 86). Of course, most *Vice* readers are not familiar with the post-subculturalist literature – and might not agree with Marchart’s conclusions even if they were. A letter in vol. 7 no. 7 of “Vice Mail” reinforces reader frustration with *Vice*’s politics through implication, arguing that,

Vice is a double meaning [magazine], they want us to take that corporate dick out of our ass and fight the power but at the same time they tell us what to do, what to wear, what to say, and how to act. At least a quarter of the magazine is ads for clothes or music. They know who [they’re] targeting and it will be easier to hit us once we are all wearing the same clothes, listening to the same music, and speaking the same way. (p. 27)

This letter again demonstrates that being a cultural intermediary is a necessary but not sufficient condition for progressive politics. It also affirms Hebdige’s (1979) belief that “It is basically the way in which commodities are used in subculture which mark the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations” (p. 103). Through Walker (2006) and his description of the brand underground, *Vice* can be understood as a subculture of stuff. A letter published in vol. 8 no. 8 that was sent to *Vice* following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks calls into question the magazine’s politics and purpose. The letter, captioned “Tits and Tragedies” by *Vice*’s editor, begins by saying,

I hope and I pray that you don’t do some asinine piss take on the World Trade Center tragedy that took place on Sept. 11th. This is not a time for your irreverent

and cruel take on things. You can't make fun of this. In a sense your magazine is over now. How can you talk about rappers and DOs & DON'Ts?

Whatever you do please don't even touch on this topic. All you're going to do is ridicule yourselves.

-- Margaret Willis

New York, NY (p. 29).

In this letter, Willis suggests that the irony *Vice* relies upon cannot overcome the material and symbolic consequences of 9/11. Reinforcing both MacCannell's belief in the apolitical nature of the postmodern subject, and Hebdige's belief that a postmodern life is lived moment-by-moment, is *Vice*'s response: "This issue was on the way to the printers when the attack happened. It was, coincidentally, our most vapid issue in six years. ... Some of the staff here was concerned with the juxtaposition of wasted partying and this monumental tragedy but fuck it – life goes on" (p. 29). To understand this reply requires Lawrence Grossberg's (1997) term "authentic inauthenticity," a type of postmodern indifference that Grossberg uses to describe,

a popular logic which refuses to distinguish between the authentic and the inauthentic, between boredom and terror – and a set of practices which celebrates the affectivity of investment while refusing to discriminate between different forms and sites of investment – as the only viable response to contemporary conditions. (p. 233)

Vice's response to 9/11 is a perfect echo of the flattening of emotional and political investment and response described by Grossberg. This is the politics of no politics. To highlight the unpolitics of *Vice* I will analyze what happens when *Vice* is confronted with a competing political discourse that cannot be integrated or circumvented through irony, self-criticism or self-reflexivity. In vol. 7 no. 10, *Vice* music writer Amy Kellner describes her attempt to profile an all-female Riot Grrrl band called Bratmobile in an article entitled "Rebel Girls: The Time Bratmobile Hurt My Feelings." In this article, Kellner explains how she was refused an interview because of the sexist and misogynist content in *Vice*, despite the fact that Kellner is friends with the band. In *Punk Productions*, Thompson (2004) situates the Riot Grrrl scene, a female-driven musical subculture that emerged in the early 1990s, making reference to a manifesto published in the zine *Riot Grrrl* in 1991, which includes tenants such as "we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits or being cool according to traditional standards" (as quoted in Thompson, p. 59). In comparison with *Vice*'s fluid and flat politics, this manifesto offers a clear statement of political purpose. Another relevant tenant of the *Riot Grrrl* manifesto is the desire to "figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodyism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and heterosexism figures in our own lives" (as quoted in Thompson, p. 65). This is another explicit statement of politics that provides for no ambiguity, in contrast to *Vice*'s post-modern race irony, inverted misogyny and hipster nihilism. To put it another way, these are two competing or incompatible discursive formations.

In the article, Bratmobile expresses reservations about *Vice*, prompting Kellner to write, “I’m not even going to bother justifying *Vice*. All I can say is that I don’t agree with everything *Vice* prints, but I do write for them and they have never censored me and my oh-so-radical ways” (p. 52). Kellner’s rationalization rests on her personal experiences with the magazine. That *Vice* can integrate “radical” writing along with sexism and racism does not pose a problem for Kellner, but in their hesitations, Bratmobile make this contradiction explicit. Kellner explains to Bratmobile that *Vice* is “operating in an ideal fantasy world where you can poke fun at every kind of stereotypical ‘identity’ group and it’s just all in good fun” (p. 52). This explanation is not sufficient for Bratmobile, and Kellner observes that,

The girls each began to list the various affronts they'd either read firsthand or just heard about. Advertisements for skater clothes featuring porn models were mentioned, as well as an article where girls tell of their experiences of being raped. I could come up with defenses or explanations for those things but I wasn't sure how much I wanted to stand behind them. (p. 52-53)

Here, Kellner is forced to confront the contradiction between her stance as a “LESBIAN who studied QUEER THEORY” and the content of *Vice* (p. 52). Bratmobile’s politicized, feminist discourse is incompatible with *Vice*’s mode of irony, and as such, Bratmobile eliminates Kellner’s room to maneuver. After the members of Bratmobile refuse to be interviewed, Kellner offers “to have the interview be about issues of sexism or about the very problems they have with *Vice*, in *Vice*” (p. 53). That Bratmobile refuse this offer reveals a critical aspect of capitalism’s ability to integrate critique into its

ongoing narrative. As a band that largely forgoes melody and tackles “radio-unfriendly” topics through their lyrics, Bratmobile embodies another variation on Curtin & Streeter’s category of “edge” (Thompson, 2004, p. 63). The “edge” of Bratmobile translates into subcultural capital, explaining why *Vice* is interested in interviewing the band. But Bratmobile’s refusal to license or loan their “edge” to *Vice* calls into question *Vice*’s subcultural capital. Although *Vice* publishes critiques in “Vice Mail,” and discloses specific aspects of the political economy of the magazine industry, it cannot incorporate a refusal to participate in the magazine’s delight. In the conclusion to her article, Kellner writes, “The bottom line is, I know it was their choice to make and I have to respect that ... but I just wish they hadn’t handled the situation in such a way as to put me in the awkward position of having to justify the way I make my living, or to doubt my own commitment to feminism. I hate me” (p. 53). Although Kellner elicits sympathy through this display of self-hatred, her article never explains how she is able to reconcile her commitment to feminism with the content of *Vice*. What could be more radical, more politicized, than Kellner offering a coherent defense of her subject position? Doing so, however, would prevent Kellner from indulging her vice and again demonstrates the incompatibility of the contested discourses.

Understandably, responses to this article support *Vice*’s ironic discourse of delight, rather than Bratmobile’s politicized feminist discourse. In vol. 8 no. 1, Tracy Dennis writes in “Vice Mail” that “I am one of the femenists [sic] out there with a sense of humour that is not constantly looking for the bad guy. I am sick to death of the in-fighting and straight-up cattiness of the scene” (p. 37). In his essay “The Order of Discourse” Foucault (1981) writes that, “one is ‘in the true’ only by obeying the rules of

a discursive ‘policing’ which one has to reactivate in each of one’s discourses” (p. 61). Within the pages of *Vice*, Bratmobile’s discourse is not “in the true” and is consequently marginalized and dismissed for ignoring the rules of irony and delight. In vol. 8 no. 2, Ana Balka writes in “Vice Mail” that “I also wanted to mention to Amy Keller [sic] that she had every right to tell Bitchmostupidbile to [go to hell] for their self-righteous Victorian ignorance and the gall to suggest she interview them for [a magazine] more to their liking...” (p. 33-35). These responses demonstrate how the rules of formation that moderate *Vice*’s discourse validate certain statements and invalidate others. I conclude my analysis of “Rebel Girls” with an excerpt from a *Globe and Mail* article in which *Vice* is given an opportunity to further police its discourse. As Patten (2002) writes,

When riot-grrrl band Bratmobile pulled out of a profile ... *Vice* printed the story of their refusal, including the band’s critique of the magazine. There was a method in that madness. “Their non-approval is emblematic of everything we despise about the last decade,” pronounces Suroosh Alvi, “uptight PC counterproductive thought, a form of liberal fascism that promotes censorship rather than freedom of expression at the end of the day.” (p. R3)

In policing *Vice*’s discourse, Alvi conflates censorship with Bratmobile’s informed personal decision to deny *Vice* access to their subcultural capital. *Vice* and Bratmobile cannot simply “agree to disagree” – Alvi must marginalize Bratmobile’s discourse through terms like “liberal fascism” to defend and protect *Vice*’s delight. However, Bratmobile’s non-approval has a material consequence that *Vice*’s policing cannot entirely dismiss or deride. By boycotting *Vice*, Bratmobile, an “edgy” political punk

band, calls into question the oxymoron of *Vice*'s "punk capitalism." According to Alvi (2002), "We learned *Vice* had to be a well-balanced combination of smart and stupid content – stupid done in a smart way and smart done in a stupid way. It had to be brutally honest and punk rock and unlike anything that came before it" (p. 12). But as Thompson (2004) writes in his introduction,

Punks want to change the world, and many believe that what most needs to be changed is capitalism.... In truth, capitalism is neither natural nor necessary, and punks have not forgotten this fact. They cannot fully imagine what the better world would look like, but they refuse to accept the one that they know as final.
(p. 3-4)

These incompatible definitions of punk suggest that the term has become a floating signifier, and helps explain how *Vice* is able to broach the underground and the mainstream. The logic of profit has become so naturalized that "punk capitalism" has gone unchallenged in journalism discourse about *Vice*. This naturalization is encouraged by *Vice*'s ahistorical politics of delight that necessitates a life lived in the eternal present.

Vice's "hipster nihilism" is ultimately an individual response to political, social and economic conditions. As discussed in Chapter Two, Muggleton (2000) argues that "subculturalists display a superficial and transient attachment to any one style" (p. 82). But as LaBruce discovers, this transience extends to politics as well, in the process reinforcing Marchart's belief that subcultures are political only in appearance. A large part of *Vice*'s success stems from the fact that it is able to appear subversive without committing to a specific political orientation. As a "double meaning" magazine, it has

been extremely adept at obscuring politics through irony, or creating a discursive formation that can neutralize competing political viewpoints, such as that of Bratmobile.

Conclusion

Through my use of critical discourse theory to analyze the written content of *Vice*, I have demonstrated a variety of strategies that allow the magazine's co-founders to administer their subcultural capital. These strategies include the use of disclosure, such as reprinting a letter from Time Inc. demonstrating that the co-founders of *Vice* were unable to sell their magazine to a large corporation because of their "edgy" content. This chapter also demonstrates that the (sub)cultural competencies of *Vice* readers includes a working knowledge of the mechanics of the magazine industry, especially the relationship between advertising and editorial. By being transparent and disclosing certain aspects of the political economy of magazines, *Vice* allows readers to critique the process of constituting readers as consumers, even as readers participate in said process. I have also demonstrated the relationship between irony and (sub)cultural competencies, which serves to further demarcate the links between pleasure and inclusion. The use of inversion, meanwhile, demonstrates *Vice*'s muddy politics. Although I have analyzed these strategies in isolation, they operate most effectively when used in combination, as they are all constitutive in slightly different ways. The issue of "*Vice* Upside Down" demonstrates how the magazine defines itself by what it is not, and in so doing reveals the delicate balancing act the magazine's retention of subcultural capital is built upon. Throughout this chapter I have used the metaphor of "hiding in delight" whenever appropriate to guide and shape my critical discourse analysis. This metaphor is

particularly suitable for considering the political limits of *Vice*'s delight in relation to irony and postmodernism. The attempt at interviewing Bratmobile shows some of the rules of *Vice*'s discursive formation and the contradictions of punk capitalism. In Chapter Five, I examine *Vice*'s "anti-fashion spreads," their "anti-photography" and their corresponding discursive strategies to explore how *Vice* represents transgression visually.

Chapter Five: Visualizing Transgression

“What characterizes the so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs.”

– Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (1981), p. 118-119.

Intro

In Chapter Four I explored how specific discursive strategies involving transparency and irony enable *Vice* to retain subcultural capital. I also explained the purpose of (sub)cultural competencies in relation to the maintenance of reader attention. In this chapter, I consider how transgression is made manifest through the photography published in *Vice*. Through the use of transgressive and shocking imagery, “Vice Fashion” attempts to distract readers from the consumer aspects of this section of the magazine. However, as both Susan Sontag and Martin Morris point out, transgressive or shocking imagery is also used by advertisers like Benetton to secure the attention of the viewer. Thus, shocking images in “Vice Fashion” constitute the reader as a consuming subject, despite denotative suggestions to the contrary. In Chapter Five I also consider “Vice Pictures,” a regular photo essay feature, along with *Vice*’s annual “Photo Issue,” which is devoted entirely to photography. I examine the proliferation of images in *Vice* in relation to consumer culture along with the images’ aesthetic qualities. The photographs in these sections enable *Vice* to prove that the transgressive lifestyle described within the magazine exists. By exposing the inhabitants of various demi-mondes and subcultures, *Vice* provides a method of authentication. Thus, the photography in *Vice* can be thought of as a form of visual ethnography, a diary of the hedonistic and experiential lifestyle championed by *Vice*’s co-founders. *Vice* also reinforces the transgressive nature of the

photography in “Vice Pictures” and “Vice Fashion” by informing readers of monies lost due to advertiser boycotts. The economic penalties *Vice* endures as a result of publishing “edgy” images challenges the work of Frank, who believes that transgression can always be recuperated by hip capitalism. *Vice* also publishes disgusting images to reinforce the visual “edge” of the magazine, and this strategy helps secure the attention of readers in a manner similar to “Vice Fashion.” Not every image in *Vice* is transgressive or shocking; many images resemble what Sontag describes as “anti-photographs.” As the pictorial equivalent of irony and indeterminacy, “anti-photographs” function as examples of the depthless images of postmodern culture as argued by Jameson and Featherstone. The floating signifiers of *Vice*’s “anti-photography” also show how photography is socially constructed, and that (sub)cultural competencies are required to correctly perceive *Vice*’s visual content.

Anti-Fashion Spreads

As the description of the inverted “Vice Fashion” in Chapter Four demonstrates, the co-founders of *Vice* have developed their fashion spreads in reaction to the codes and styles of mainstream magazines like *Details*, *Esquire* and *GQ*. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Heath (2001) argues that this type of “ironic attitude towards consumption” simply conceals an oppositional consumerism “dominated by negative preferences” (p. 15). “Vice Fashion,” regardless of how it approaches the display of clothing, helps create a “supportive editorial atmosphere” for the numerous streetwear companies that advertise in the magazine (Steinem, 1990, p. 18). “Vice Fashion” would not appear in *Vice* if it did not serve an economic purpose, just as the switch from newsprint to glossy paper in

October of 1998 allowed the magazine to improve the production quality of photographs and thus attract more advertising from American streetwear clothing firms (Heimlich, 2002). It is worth revisiting Fielding's (2001) observation that,

The key to *Vice*'s success came in the lucrative advertising contracts it found with specialized urban clothing labels ... Advertising with *Vice* allowed a company to reach its audience directly without compromising any of its underground cachet... [A]dvertisers in *Vice* could bypass risking their integrity as underground labels by advertising with magazine giants. (p. 67)

Vice offers a very specific editorial and visual environment for its advertising clients. It is professional and glossy enough that urban clothing companies will advertise in the magazine. But retaining this type of advertising requires constant vigilance. The more successful *Vice* has become financially, the more it has minimized the extent to which fashion spreads appear to provide a "supportive editorial atmosphere." In vol. 5 no. 8, the fashion section resembles a storyboard, with a series of interrelated photographs featuring a couple sparring. (Appendix G.) The visual narrative is underscored by captions that describe the clothing being worn in each photograph. These captions include both the clothing's brand name and price. On the final page of the fashion shoot is a short paragraph about each of the clothing lines featured in the photo shoot. The links between the clothing displayed and consumption is clear: the fashion shoot in vol. 5 no. 8 contains clothing that *Vice* readers should consider buying, and the section serves as a catalogue or consumer guide. Almost a year later, in vol. 6 no. 7, "Vice Fashion" no longer includes prices, although clothing brand names are still indicated with large type. (Appendix H.)

By the year 2000 (vol. 7), the brand name text is further minimized. (Appendix I.) At the same time that “Vice Fashion” minimizes the textual markers indicating the consumer aspect of their fashion spreads, the style and subject matter more strongly denote transgression or shock.

An example of this evolution can be seen in “Vice Fashion” vol. 8 no. 3, which is entitled “Life in Hell.” Unlike early fashion spreads, “Life in Hell” features professional lighting and clear, crisp images, demonstrating the professionalization of the magazine. “Life in Hell” begins with a two paragraph description of how profitable the drug trade in New York’s Lower East Side was during the early 1980s. Each of the seven photographs in “Life in Hell” exhibits a different type of weapon or jerry-rigged implement necessary for surviving incarceration in a New York state prison, including a set of magazines fashioned into a protective vest. (Appendix J.) In “Life in Hell” the link between transgression and fashion is obvious, as incarceration represents a transgression of the law. The style and sophistication of *Vice*’s “anti-fashion spreads” continue to evolve between vol. 8 no. 3 through to vol. 12 no. 11, the final issue of *Vice* analyzed in this thesis. These “anti-fashion spreads” make *Vice* attractive to clothing advertisers while at the same time placating readers who recognize the consumer function of “Vice Fashion.” Readers with the appropriate (sub)cultural competencies can enjoy the “anti-fashion spread” elements of “Vice Fashion” without feeling as if they are being constituted as consumers.

The clothing featured in “Vice Fashion,” however, is not the only thing that can be consumed. The less apparent aspect of “Vice Fashion” lies in the fact that it encourages the consumption of transgression and transgressive imagery. In order to

demonstrate this possibility, I consider the “Vice Fashion” from vol. 12 no. 4 in detail. Entitled “Lifer,” this fashion spread begins with a short interview with a 44-year old woman named “Jen” who has been using heroin for 30 years. Jen is featured in all five photographs of “Lifer,” and to maintain anonymity Jen’s face is obscured in each. In one photograph “Jen” prepares to inject heroin, with drug paraphernalia visible on a small table in the foreground. (Appendix K). As with the prison photos in “Life in Hell,” this fashion spread represents another transgression of the law. The next image in the spread features Jen about to inject heroin, and the final image shows Jen injecting, with a small pink circle covering the needle along with the text “Trust us, what’s behind this dot isn’t pretty. If you really want to see, go to viceland.com” (p. 82). Given the unsettling imagery in this fashion shoot, the clothing worn by Jen cannot be considered the focal point. In “The Rhetoric of the Image,” Barthes (2002) explores the grammar of photography, arguing that the literal image in a photograph can be described as denoted, while the symbolic image is connoted. As Sekula (1982a) observes, “The photograph is imagined to have a primitive core of meaning, devoid of all cultural determination. It is this uninvested analogue that Roland Barthes refers to as the *denotative* function of the photograph” (p. 87). In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1981) explores the semiotics of photography through the studium and the punctum of an image. According to Barthes, the studium is “a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment ... but without special acuity” while the punctum is an “element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me” (Barthes, p. 26). As Barthes (1981) explains, the punctum is akin to punctuation. In the last three images in “Lifer,” the punctum of the photograph is a literal prick – a junkie preparing to insert a needle into her damaged vein. If the injection

of heroin is the punctum, then the studium of these photographs (especially the image of Jen preparing to inject) is the clothing she is wearing. Beside the photograph of Jen preparing to inject, on the far left side of the page, in small font and italics, is the text “Underwear by Agent Provocateur, vintage jacket” (p. 80). The size and placement of this text give it the appearance of an afterthought, a minor detail given the punctum of the image. The text again demonstrates how this photograph foregrounds the habits of Jen the heroin user to the detriment of the clothing.

Despite these discursive/semiotic strategies, “Lifer” represents a clear intersection between consumption and transgression. In “Vice Fashion” in general, and in “Lifer” in particular, the connection between the two is made literal. Despite the graphic and distracting images that make it difficult for the viewer to contemplate the clothing on offer, consumption has not been avoided. The implication that “Vice Fashion” is meant to facilitate the purchase of clothing has been replaced with the consumption of transgression. According to Sontag (1977), “To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (p. 14). In “Lifer,” Jen is being consumed, even if most readers do not consciously register the symbolic possession that Sontag describes. Reading “Vice Fashion” is an act of consumption, regardless of whether the reader contemplates the purchase of the clothing within its pages.

Another method of underscoring the consumer gaze described by Sontag is to explore how this fashion shoot makes reference to codes and conventions of

contemporary advertising. In his examination of postmodern consumer culture, Martin Morris (2001) argues that the marketing campaigns of United Colors of Benetton exploited social and political issues as shock tactics by featuring a white baby being nursed by a black woman ... authentic images of death row inmates, or splattered blood (in reference to the conflict in Kosovo). The use of shock tactics ... though they increase the risk of failure of the campaign, may have become more needed to reach consumers jaded by conventional advertising. (p. 13)

The “risk of failure” alluded to by Morris evokes *Vice*’s use of “edge.” And by using images of a prisoner and a woman injecting heroin in their fashion spreads, *Vice* not only obscures the consumer function of “Vice Fashion,” but harnesses these transgressive and shocking images to secure reader attention. In this way, *Vice* reinforces Smythe’s argument that the audience commodity sold to advertisers involves a promise that readers “will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times” (p. 257). The issue of whether readers will study the clothing or the transgression, the studium or the punctum of the photographs in “Vice Fashion” is irrelevant – what matters is whether the section receives adequate reader attention. In the 2006 *Vice* Media Kit, readers of the magazine are described as “An extremely loyal and involved audience” (p. 4). In the survey breakdown, the Media Kit contains the observation that 44 percent of *Vice* readers “spend 1-2 hours reading each issue, 34 percent spend over two hours” (p. 4). These descriptions and statistics reinforce Smythe’s observations, and help to better situate the use of transgressive imagery in “Vice Fashion.” Sontag (2003), meanwhile, has also considered the marketing imagery of Benetton, observing that “A notorious advertising campaign for

Benetton, the Italian manufacturer of casual clothing, used a photograph of the blood-stained shirt of a dead Croatian soldier. Advertising photographs are often just as ambitious, artful, slyly casual, transgressive, ironic, and solemn as art photography” (p. 120). *Vice*’s use of transgressive imagery serves not only to capture the attention of readers, but blurs the distinction between the logic of “Vice Fashion” and the logic of advertising. Sontag (2003) argues that “The hunt for more dramatic (as they’re often described) images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and a source of value” (p. 23). Shock attracts viewers, but each new dramatic image serves to desensitize the viewer, and over time depletes the effectiveness of the technique.

The “Vice Fashion” featuring heroin users in vol. 12 no. 4 is not an isolated example of using shock for the purposes of securing attention. Since vol. 8 no. 3, *Vice* has often (but not exclusively) used shocking and transgressive images. But as Sontag (1977) argues, “Photographs shock insofar as they show something novel” (p. 19). In keeping with this logic, the 52 different “Vice Fashion” spreads between vol. 8 no. 3 and vol. 12 no. 11 shock in a variety of novel ways. Many spreads foreground the models and ignore the clothing. For example, in vol. 10 no. 11, “Vice Fashion” is staged at The Terra Cotta Inn, a clothing-optional resort in Palm Springs, California. Without clothes, the models are left wearing only a handful of accessories – necklaces, rings – with a tote bag in the background. The nudity of the models serves as the punctum, while the clothing again serves as the studium of the image. (Appendix L.) In vol. 11 no. 3, “Vice Fashion” uses photographs of Brazilian transvestite prostitutes – men who transgress gender conventions – to model women’s clothing. (Appendix M.) The “Vice Fashion” in vol. 8

no. 7 offers a collection of Polaroid photos of shoplifters taken at various convenience stores. As the introduction explains, “These Polaroids are taken by a [professional security officer] to ensure that the accused does not return to the store” (p. 50). Taken in isolation, each example reinforces the link between transgression and consumption, shock and attention. Taken together, these images represent a strategy whereby readers believe they elide consumption by viewing images that denote transgression while the connotative aspects of these same images serve to constitute readers as consumers.

Reinforcing Transgression

Publishing transgressive imagery in “Vice Fashion” demonstrates to readers that *Vice* is an “edgy,” transgressive publication with surplus subcultural capital. For Barthes (1981) a photograph possesses “that-has-been” and images “attest that what I see has indeed existed” (p. 77 and p. 82). Such imagery is not sufficient, however, in the cultural and economic environment described by Frank, where transgression can be used to sell cars, shoes and beer. To ensure transgression retains its power, *Vice* also *tells* readers that the magazine’s images are transgressive. Although “Vice Fashion” solidified its visual and textual approach with vol. 8 no. 3., the magazine experimented with transgressive and shocking imagery prior to this issue. Not all of these attempts were successful. In vol. 6 no. 8, “Vice Fashion” features four different models reenacting exaggerated racial stereotypes. A young Chinese man, with fake buck teeth, wears a coolie hat as he makes a kung fu pose. An African-Canadian man strikes a “mammy” pose. A female Indo-Canadian poses as a mystic replete with turban, and, most memorably, a bald woman sieg heils the camera, with a KKK doll in her pocket. (Appendix N.) In lieu of context, the

cover informs readers that this is “The Racist Issue” and in the center of the magazine is “The Racist Section” with 16-pages of content (including “Vice Fashion”) containing what *Vice* co-founder McInnes has described as “post-modern race irony.” The ironic wink or “the reveal” is to be found on the final page of the fashion shoot, where the four models pose together, devoid of costume. They are laughing and smiling (the bald woman hugs an unidentified person inside a KKK uniform), indicating their delight, their ability to transgress taboos of representation without apparent consequence. (Appendix O.)

A “Vice Mail” letter in vol. 6 no. 10 complains about the fashion shoot, (specifically the sieg heil photograph), writing that, “I just can’t understand taking the KKK so lightly that [you] would put them in a clothing ad” (p. 23). The editor of *Vice* replies, “Nobody minded the buck-toothed Chinaman doing Kung-Fu or the meditating Indian with a turban on her head but we lost two advertisers to the zieg heiling [sic] skinhead with the KKK baby in her pocket and the bug-eyed minstrel in the ‘Mammy’ position” (p. 120). *Vice* does not apologize for these images, instead explaining the consequences of transgressing racial taboos in relation to its impact on advertising, thus increasing its subcultural capital. A few issues later, in the vol. 7 no. 3 “Employees of the Month” section, the editor writes that, “The first time we met Anik, she was posing as a Nazi for a *Vice* fashion shoot and sieg heiling her bald head off. This cost us three clients, or a total of \$10,000 in undelivered ads” (p. 16). In stating how much money the racist photo shoot cost the magazine, *Vice* quantifies the transgressive nature of the imagery. In a consumer environment where transgression fuels consumer culture, to be truly transgressive is to create an image that cannot be recuperated by the logic of capitalism.

The strategy of making the tension between transgression and advertising revenue explicit is so important to *Vice* that it appears repeatedly. In vol. 8 no. 10, in “Vice Pictures,” is a series of images taken by a photographer named Dash Snow. On the first page of the section are 48 small Polaroid pictures of various youthful indiscretions, images of graffiti, strippers, public nudity, drug use, heavy drinking and fellatio. (Appendix P.) The quantity of images creates the effect of a visual diary, a record of Dash Snow’s friends caught by his camera, their various illicit deeds immortalized. The only text provided for the entire four-page spread reads “Dash’s Polaroids” and it is left to the viewer to decode the subcultural significance of these images. In vol. 9 no. 1, the following letter appears in “Vice Mail”:

Dear Eric [Lavoie],

Thank you for the call yesterday however ... We will not advertise in *Vice Magazine* again. Additionally, after reviewing the current issue of *Vice* we are all appalled at the offensive graphic coverage and editorial content that you have published. This will prohibit any future relations between *Vice* and American Sporting Goods.

ED GOLDMAN

Los Angeles, CA. (p. 123)

Eric Lavoie is part of *Vice*’s advertising team, and this letter appears to be a response to Lavoie’s attempt to convince Ed Goldman to continue to advertise in the magazine. The editor’s response to this letter reads: “Great, \$150,000 of advertising gone because of a few Polaroids” (p. 123). As with the racist fashion shoot, *Vice* indicates its transgressive

spirit by demonstrating to readers that the hedonistic and transgressive lifestyle detailed by Dash Snow's photography is too "edgy" for some advertisers. It also demonstrates the trial and error element involved in determining the economically "correct" side of edge. Just as the edge of irony in *Vice* is blunted in later issues, so too is transgression. In the vol. 11 no. 6 "Photo Issue" of *Vice*, male genitalia, for the first time, is blurred digitally. In vol. 11 no. 8 a letter in "Vice Mail" complains, "So you guys are censoring cocks in the Photo Issue now. You might as well change your name to *The Face*. Fucking sellouts" (p. 32). Putting aside the strange, if not surreal equation between the blurring of male nudity and "selling out," the comparison with *The Face* once again demonstrates that (sub)cultural competencies necessitate the ability of readers to situate the content of *Vice* against other magazines, mainstream or otherwise. The letter also suggests the "edge" of *Vice*'s photography is important to readers. The editor of *Vice* responds,

Sorry, but the truth is it's too expensive. Advertisers don't mind tits and swearing and drugs and all that, but for every dink you show you lose about \$80,000 of ads. It's just not worth it. You will never see a dick or [testicle] in *Vice* ever again" (p. 32).

This response explains the cost-benefit ratio of transgression, and is reinforced in journalistic discourse about *Vice*. In a *Canadian Business* interview, *Vice* co-founder Gavin McInnes explains that hundreds of thousands of dollars can be lost due to "harsh" content or a "penis joke" (as quoted in Sax, 2006, p. 18). Bataille situates transgression as unproductive activity that resides outside the economic sphere of work; the racist fashion shoot, Dash Snow and the censoring of male genitalia demonstrate that the only way

transgression can now be measured is in purely economic terms. Jenks (2003) writes that “excess is not an aberration nor a luxury, it is rather a dynamic force in cultural reproduction – it prevents stagnation by breaking the rule and it ensures stability by reaffirming the rule” (p. 7). Rules must be broken, taboos must be transgressed, even if it costs *Vice* money. Losing advertising revenue temporarily depletes *Vice*’s economic capital, but it preserves or increases their subcultural capital, which is ultimately more profitable over the long run. It would be more damaging for *Vice* to lose its “edge” and become unable to generate content that was unrecuperable by at least some of their advertisers.

Comparing the cover of vol. 7 no. 10 with vol. 9 no. 9, both of which depict cocaine use, demonstrates what the difference between acceptable and unacceptable transgression means to one of the co-founders of *Vice*. The cover of vol. 7 no. 10 features a young man hunched over a mirror with a large pile of cocaine. The mirror is on a bed, and in the bottom of the picture a variety of pornographic magazine titles are visible. On the floor are binders full of CDs. (Appendix Q.) In the “Vice Mail” of vol. 8 no. 1, an email from *Vice* co-founder Suroosh Alvi to co-founder Gavin McInnes is reprinted. The letter refers to the cover of vol. 7 no. 10 and begins:

Gavin,

Why did you change the cover? The last one we agreed on had the coke on the edge of the page and now it’s a full-on cocaine snorting fest. This is going to make the lives of ad sales people a nightmare. (p. 33)

Alvi's first concern with depicting cocaine use on the cover is how it will affect the finances of *Vice*. Alvi goes on to reinforce this by listing three problems with the cover, the first being, "It is bad for business.... Their jobs [ad sales] are remarkably difficult as it is and I think there was a pretty big difference between the two versions" (vol. 8 no. 1, p. 33). Alvi's letter provides insight into the negotiation of the transgressive, of how the water pressure against the dam – recalling Scott's metaphor for the hidden transcript – is negotiated. Alvi then describes the third problem with the cover:

I'm not down with the glorification of cocaine. Pot or ecstasy or GHB are one thing and an article about the "top ten coke records" [an article that recommends which songs to listen to while high on cocaine] is funny but the way we had agreed to lay it out left something to the imagination and there was some subtlety and class there. Now the message is simple and we're giving an endorsement to something I don't want to endorse. I know too many people who have lost everything or are dead because of it.

I can't look at this issue with a clear conscience and if I could stop the presses I would.

--Suroosh Alvi

New York, NY (p. 33; p. 35)

In the letter, Alvi describes a space between implication ("something to the imagination") and the actual ("endorsement") and demonstrates how hiding space can be generated or removed simply by cropping an image in a particular way. A more "successful" depiction of cocaine use appears on the cover of vol. 9 no. 9, where *Vice* offers an image that

leaves “something to the imagination” and thus does not create difficulties for the advertising department. The cover of vol. 9 no. 9 celebrates the fifth anniversary of *Vice*, and consists of a metallic shiny surface that is meant to resemble a mirror, with an embossed, granular white line in the bottom right corner. Beneath the superimposed mirror material is a young woman about to take a sip from a coffee mug. (Appendix R.) This cover requires (sub)cultural competencies in order to interpret the image as a line of cocaine on a mirror, waiting to be ingested. Flipping the magazine reveals the extent to which this image is suitable for recuperated by capitalism. In order to help offset the cost of this special printing technique, *Vice* convinced Op, a sportswear manufacturer, to run an ad on the back cover of vol. 9 no. 9 that also utilizes the shiny mirror finish. The back cover is almost identical to the front cover, only the embossed granular white power has been shaped into the Op logo. (Appendix S.) The cocaine cover of vol. 7 no. 10 and the shiny cocaine cover of vol. no. 9 represents the extent of *Vice*’s “room to maneuver,” the term Chambers uses to describe the amount of play or leeway between disturbance of and recuperation by the system.

Although the Op mirror demonstrates that connotations of cocaine use can be commodified and recuperated by capitalism, I have highlighted the trial and error aspects of *Vice*’s use of transgression. This section has focused on how *Vice* has repeatedly lost money through transgression, in the process demonstrating the contingencies of industrializing edge. Where Bataille refers to the irrational nature of taboo, *Vice* finds the instrumental rationality of lost profits the best way of describing transgression.

Vice Pictures

Vice has increased the prominence and frequency of photography in the magazine, beginning with vol. 7 no. 3 (the debut of “Vice Pictures”) and vol. 8 no. 6 (the debut of an annual “Photo Issue”). Just as shocking and transgressive images in “Vice Fashion” constitute readers as consuming subjects, so are the abundance of images in the annual *Vice* “Photo Issue” and “Vice Pictures” compatible with the logic of capitalism. As Sontag (1977) argues, “The final reason for the need to photograph everything lies in the very logic of consumption itself. To consume means to burn, to use up – and, therefore, to need to be replenished. As we make images and consume them, we need still more images; and still more” (p. 179). Unlike “Vice Fashion,” which relies on a few large photographs, “Vice Pictures” and the annual “Photo Issue” are filled with many smaller images. It is both the quantity and quality of images that differentiates “Vice Pictures” from “Vice Fashion.” The technically sophisticated images in “Vice Fashion” utilize professional clothing models, sets, lighting, composition and high quality film stock that are nowhere to be seen in “Vice Pictures.” Instead of using the punctum to attract the attention of the viewer, “Vice Pictures” and the annual *Vice* “Photo Issue” are studies in the studium, although in many of these images Barthes’s “general, enthusiastic commitment” can be more accurately described as diffuse and unenthusiastic detachment. The “Vice Pictures” in vol. 10, no. 3 features four pages of photographs by Jason Nocito. Each page has four random photographs. On the first page, starting at the top left and moving clockwise, is a picture of a man carrying a life-sized fake deer along a cement barrier, followed by a man peeking around the corner of a weathered waterfront building, followed by a young man holding a long can of beer beneath his chin, followed by a man

and woman embracing each other on the ground. (Appendix T.) Since *Vice* has pioneered “anti-fashion spreads,” it is no surprise they favour “anti-photographs.” As Susan Sontag (1977) observes, “Photography itself increasingly reflects the prestige of the rough, the self-disparaging, the offhand, the undisciplined – the ‘anti-photograph’” (p. 74). The “offhand” character of Nocito’s photographs encourages the viewer to jump from image to image, thereby intensifying the rate at which these images are consumed. On the third page of “Vice Pictures” in vol. 10 no. 3 are another four images. The first image in the top left corner is of an injured man laying on a New York subway platform, followed by a photograph of an arm in a cast, followed by a woman on a street corner flashing her breasts as people move equipment into a large van in the background, followed by an overturned semi-truck. (Appendix U.) Because each image is relatively small, it is difficult to determine what type of equipment is being put into the van in the third picture, or the type of injury the man on the subway platform has sustained. The offhand nature of these images becomes the visual equivalent of the emotional flatness described by Grossberg, a photographic depiction of “postmodern indifference.” Jameson (1991) uses the term “depthlessness” to describe the dominant character of postmodern imagery, arguing that such imagery involves “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms” (p. 9). The depthlessness of *Vice* imagery suggests that the magazine’s lack of political or emotional investment extends beyond its written content and into the visual realm. In this way, images such as Nocito’s encompass the ironic detachment and indeterminacy seen elsewhere in *Vice*.

The lack of captions adds to the depthless quality of Nocito's images, denying the viewer context or narrative. By presenting images without captions, *Vice* implies that their photographs speak for themselves, and that perhaps they have nothing to say. The lack of visual context or connective logic, coupled with the randomness of the images does not encourage the viewer to linger or consider these images with any thoroughness. The overload of anti-photographs in *Vice* also allows Nocito's photographs to be viewed as disposable images. A disposable image, through its composition and content, integrates the logic of photographic consumption described by Sontag into its very aesthetic. Disposable images are considered briefly and instantly forgotten, as their depthlessness and lack of context encourage the viewer to proceed to the next image, and the next, thus mimicking the insatiable logic of consumption. *Vice's* disposable images are made possible in large degree by digital cameras, which eliminate the artificial scarcity of images associated with traditional rolls of film. Because digital cameras can store hundreds of photographs on an erasable and reusable memory card, they facilitate the documentation of the everyday and the offhand, as opposed to the limited exposures in a traditional camera, which are generally used to record special events, vacations and family rituals or milestones. Many of the images in "Vice Pictures" document the lifestyles and incidental moments of the demi-monde. These photographs, like the images of Nocito and the Polaroids of Dash Snow from vol. 8 no. 10 rely on their immediacy for visual impact. They also reflect the impermanence of living in the eternal present and the aforementioned documentary impulse. In the case of Dash Snow, the Polaroid is generally used to capture spontaneous moments, because the lower image resolution of the film stock does not permit formal compositional techniques. There is also a "candid"

aspect to the Polaroid, in the sense that it can be used to capture illicit moments because the film does not need to be sent to a photo lab to be developed. Although digital photography also removes the need for a photographic intermediary, the clunky white frame of the Polaroid continues to denote this “illicitness” in a way that a digital photograph cannot. Finally, both Nocito and Dash Snow, in recording the day-to-day actions of the *Vice* demi-monde, serve to commodify their lifestyles. Just as Bondaroff and other members of the brand underground are able to convert their urban lifestyles into t-shirts, the very act of “*Viceness*” becomes a commodity.

The difficulty of decoding images such as Nocito’s in the absence of denotation recalls the concept of (sub)cultural competencies. In vol. 9 no. 7, an article that explains the developments leading up to George W. Bush declaring war on Iraq (“You Better Get Ready to Die”) is supplemented with five photographs by Ryan McGinley. McGinley is a frequent contributor to *Vice* (he photographed the cocaine cover for vol. 7 no. 10) and his work demonstrates the indeterminacy of the ironic and depthless anti-photograph. In this case, McGinley’s photographs feature an assortment of nude and semi-nude young men and women, many of whom brandish guns. The images do not correspond to the content of article, as would be the case in a traditional magazine feature, where photography or illustration would be used to underscore the editorial. In one image, a nude girl runs through some fireworks, gritting her teeth into a hard grin, a towel as a cape trailing behind her. (Appendix V.) There is an obvious discrepancy between the frivolous images and the gravity of the political situation described by the text. The emotional and political depthlessness of *Vice* is reinforced through these images. In vol. 9 no. 9, in “Vice Mail,” a reader complains about the images:

[D]o us all a favour and get more than one photographer. It's nice to see *Vice* graduate from [borrowing from] *National Geographic* for supporting [pictures] but replacing them with a blind collection of repetitive, irrelevant snapshots of drunk teens is not a solution. Maybe I'm jaded because I'm a photographer and it's so obvious that this guy is doing this for free so you settle for half-assed stuff that costs you nothing. But it really cheapens the editorial. (p. 30 and 32)

This letter again demonstrates that not every *Vice* reader is fully constituted according to *Vice's* designs. The description of the images as “repetitive, irrelevant snapshots” underscores the danger of depthlessness. The editor of *Vice* replies, “Ryan McGinley isn't half-assed. He's in Milan right now doing a solo show and when he gets back he'll be doing another at the fucking Whitney” (p. 32). This letter writer correctly identifies the disposable aspects of McGinley's images. But in this instance, the images are meant to be disposable and profound. The tone of *Vice's* response resembles a gavel smacking a loud hard surface. Not only is McGinley not “half-assed,” his photography is becoming part of the canon of contemporary art. For those with the appropriate (sub)cultural competencies, McGinley's ability to capture depthlessness is an asset, not a liability.

The images' lack of punctum, coupled with their depthlessness and their sheer quantity, encourage the viewer to skip from image to image in a distracted manner. And by creating images that integrate the logic of consumption into their style and subject matter, *Vice* produces disposable pictures. The multitude of images in “Vice Pictures,” combined with the ability to take hundreds of images with a digital camera at little-to-no

cost, contribute to the documentary qualities of these images and serves to commodify *Vice*'s lifestyle.

Disgust

The random, ironic and depthless images taken by Jason Nocito, Ryan McGinley and Dash Snow are not the only aspects of anti-photography in *Vice*. Some of the most dramatic examples of “rough” and “undisciplined” anti-photographs in *Vice* are in the images of disgust that appear frequently. William Miller (1997), in his book *The Anatomy of Disgust*, defines disgust as an emotion, “a complex sentiment that can be lexically marked in English by expressions declaring things or actions to be repulsive, revolting, or giving rise to reactions described as revulsion and abhorrence as well as disgust” (p. 2). Where Nocito's images are vague, disgust is visceral, and images of vomit, feces and decaying food transgress social taboos and aesthetic sentiments. A predominant type of image that provokes disgust in *Vice* involves vomit. As a DON'Ts caption from vol. 11 no. 1 explains, “We're a very pro-barf publication” (p. 66). Images of vomit appear in at least six different issues of *Vice*, and a large photograph above the Table of Contents in vol. 9 no. 4 features *Vice* photographer Ryan McGinley projectile vomiting toward the camera. (Appendix W.) The denotative qualities of vomit do not require further explication; what is more important is that the use of disgusting imagery in *Vice* implies a readership able to stomach such “edgy” images. This tolerance for disgust can be interpreted as a reaction or a challenge to the mainstream aesthetic of beauty and social decorum (Winfried Menninghaus, 2003). If *Vice* embodies what other magazines are not, then disgust is another way to define *Vice* through Heath's negative preferences.

Although photographs of vomit are unpleasant, these images have specific connotations within the pleasure-centric lifestyle described by the magazine. An article from vol. 11 no. 11 defends the practice of vomiting, noting that “People don’t understand our level of hedonism. We barf because we overdid it and intend to continue overdoing it well into tomorrow” (p. 36). Thus, vomit becomes a badge of honour, a marker of edge and excess that is valorized by *Vice*’s subcultural milieu. As Miller (1997) argues, “It is culture, not nature, that draws the lines between defilement and purity, clean and filthy, those crucial boundaries disgust is called on to police” (p. 15). To appreciate the connotations of vomit in *Vice* signals that the reader “gets” its purpose, that he or she has been conditioned appropriately.

Other disgust motifs include feces (including a four-page article entitled “The Vice Guide to Shit” published in vol. 10 no. 11) and rats (the cover of vol. 10 no. 3 features a photograph of a dead rat on the cover and vol. 12 no. 5 features an article entitled “10 Things To Do With a Dead Rat”). A final example of disgust is the Gross Jar. Appearing for the first time in vol. 6 no. 8, this large jar was initially filled with feces, hot beer, a yogurt substitute called Kefir, a cigarette and a piece of cooked chicken and then left in the hot sun. The Gross Jar disappeared a few issues later and did not reappear until vol. 11 no. 11. In response to a letter printed in vol. 12 no. 2, the editors of *Vice* observe that, “The Gross Jar has gotten more reader mail than anything else in the magazine in the last couple of years. Weird” (p. 30). These images of disgust serve to reinforce *Vice*’s “edge” by repelling and repulsing some readers and attracting others. While the consumerist connotations of vomit, feces and dead rats are even less apparent than the transgressive imagery used in “Vice Fashion,” disgusting photography provides

another method of ensuring that *Vice* readers pay attention to the content of the magazine. Miller (1997) argues that “even as the disgusting repels, it rarely does so without also capturing our attention” and that “Disgust shocks, entertains by shocking, and sears itself into memory” (p. x and p. 17). Like transgression, the unforgettable aspects of disgust ensures readers attend to the content of “Vice Pictures” and the various “Photo Issues” using a strategy that mimics the logic of advertising. As Ryan McGinley’s images suggest, to decode successfully an “anti-photograph” implies a constitutive process, and the disgusting photographs in *Vice* reinforce this process. Sekula (1982b) believes that, “The photograph is a *place of work*, a structured and structuring space within which the reader deploys, and is deployed by, what codes he or she is familiar with in order to *make sense*” (p. 153). This is labour in the Smythe sense of the term, where even disposable images require work on the part of the viewer. This work is disguised and mitigated by the visceral aspects of disgusting photographs, which, through their denotative qualities appear as “natural” images. However, as both Sekula and Hall argue, photographic literacy is learned, and the naturalness of an image serves to mask the discursive and constitutive aspects of that opacity.

Images of disgust in *Vice* represent another method of demonstrating “edge” and distinguishing the mandate of the magazine from mainstream competitors. The ability of *Vice* readers to stomach specific images of disgust provide evidence for the cultural construction of social taboos. But disgust, like shock, ensures readers pay attention to the content of the magazine, while the “naturalness” of such visceral images helps elide the process of constitution such naturalness necessitates.

Conclusion

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1981) argues that “Ultimately, photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is *pensive*, when it thinks” (p. 38). Despite using images of transgression and disgust to denote edge, the strategies and connotative aspects of *Vice*’s photography are less subversive than their surfaces suggest. The “anti-fashion spreads” that appear in “Vice Fashion” use shocking and transgressive images of heroin junkies, nudist camps, transvestites and shoplifters to distract readers from the section’s purpose as a “supportive editorial environment.” However, the transgressive denotation of these images masks the fact that these shocking images capture the attention of the viewer in the same manner, and for the same purpose, as advertising photography. Furthermore, “Vice Fashion” encourages the consumption of transgression, regardless of whether or not the viewer contemplates the purchase of the clothing displayed in the fashion shoot.

In a cultural and economic environment that is able to recuperate symbolic forms of rebellion, resistance and transgression, *Vice* must not only publish shocking photographs, but prove that these images are indeed transgressive. Thus, *Vice* has informed readers that a racist photo shoot cost the magazine \$10,000 in unpaid advertising; a series of illicit Polaroids cost \$150,000; and instances of male nudity cost \$80,000. That such disclosure is a recurring strategy suggests it is one of the only methods that allows *Vice* to convincingly reinforce transgression. In order to understand better the difference between an acceptable and unacceptable image of transgression in *Vice*, I have contrasted two different covers that depict the use of cocaine, in the process demonstrating the space between implication and endorsement. An examination of “Vice

Pictures” shows how the anti-photographs of *Vice* constitute viewers as consuming subjects. Through depthless and offhand images, *Vice* encourages the viewer to treat some of the magazine’s photography as disposable, and in so doing incorporates the logic of consumption into the image’s very aesthetic qualities. Finally, images of disgust reinforce *Vice*’s edge, but at the same time demonstrate the constructed nature of the magazine’s photography and challenge the “naturalness” of any given image.

Conclusion

Through a critical discourse analysis, I have considered the multiple strategies that *Vice* uses to obtain and retain subcultural capital, including disclosure, “the reveal,” irony, inversion, circulation restrictions, refusing certain advertisers entry into the magazine, a politics of the eternal present and telling readers the cost of unrecuperable images, along with the magazine’s use of disgusting, transgressive, depthless and disposable images. The three founders of *Vice* – Gavin McInnes, Shane Smith and Suroosh Alvi – have used their position within the circuit of culture to create a magazine that defines itself through negation – an apolitical publication filled with anti-photography and anti-fashion spreads. Given their ability to publish politically or socially progressive material due to the magazine’s financial independence and unique distribution network, it is telling that *Vice* chooses instead to hide in delight. That *Vice* ignores the political potential their editorial freedom affords them offers evidence that cultural intermediaries possess no real power. The apolitical nature of *Vice* also suggests that cultural intermediaries risk limiting their audience and their profitability through overt expressions of political sentiment, and thus cultural intermediaries are given a circumscribed amount of room in which to maneuver.

That *Vice* relies upon depthlessness, irony and images of disgust reflects a recurring theme in this thesis – the fixed space between the potential and the actual conduct of the magazine. The gap between what *Vice* promises and what it delivers can be understood in a variety of ways. Irony provides one of the clearest methods of conceptualizing this gap, since, as Linda Hutcheon (1992) argues, “Irony can obviously be both political *and* apolitical, both conservative *and* radical, both repressive *and*

democratizing” (p. 35). The indeterminacy of irony and inversion provides *Vice* an opportunity to appear progressive without being held accountable for its content. *Vice* also operates in the gap between the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies’s notion of subculture, (where style is subversive) and the post-subculturalist literature (where homology has evaporated and style is another consumer option). This is also the gap between politics and pleasure. For *Vice* to retain its “edge,” its readers must believe that subculture is inherently subversive, which, as Marchart demonstrates, is a myth. In doing so, *Vice* dramatizes the difference between oppositional behaviour and resistance. All of these gaps provide *Vice* discursive space in which to “hide.” Given that Hebdige (1988) provides the guiding metaphor for this analysis, I return, once again, to his statement: “It is a hiding in the light” (p. 35). In the paragraph following this quote, Hebdige (1988) outlines another set of related oppositions and gaps, arguing that,

The “subcultural response” is neither simply affirmation nor refusal, neither “commercial exploitation” nor “genuine revolt.” It is neither simply resistance against some external order nor straightforward conformity with the parent culture. It is both a declaration of independence, of otherness, of alien intent, a refusal of anonymity, of subordinate status. It is an *insubordination*. And at the same time it is also a confirmation of the fact of powerlessness, a celebration of impotence. (p. 35)

My examination of *Vice* suggests a fuller description of the liminal space Hebdige describes. This “celebration of impotence” is depoliticized, unlike the publications that *Vice* draws inspiration from, such as zines, alternative weeklies, and the underground

publications of the 1960s. *Vice*'s strategies serve to invert the ideas underpinning the notion of "hiding in the light." I have made repeated reference to Rob Walker's article on the "brand underground" in order to demonstrate that subcultural commodification now occurs from within a given subculture or lifestyle. The internal commodification of subculture through the "brand underground," and by extension, *Vice*, demonstrates how ingrained and naturalized the logic of capitalism has become. Andrew Wernick calls this the logic of "promotional culture," in his book of the same name. *Vice* has managed to cast its financial success as a virtue, not a subcultural sin, demonstrating it is possible to "sell out" in a subculturally acceptable way. And there is nothing ironic about the profit motive.

However, the *Vice* approach to subculture reveals that politics and consumer culture are incompatible discourses, which explains why a letter in "Vice Mail" describes *Vice* as a "double-meaning magazine." Given *Vice*'s ability to fine tune its strategies, it is safe to assume that the magazine is apolitical for financial reasons. Without some type of implied political orientation, the subversive aura of *Vice* would quickly dissipate, but by avoiding a stable, articulated political stance – such as the anti-capitalist and anti-sexist platform of Bratmobile – *Vice* is able to elide contradictions such as "punk capitalism" and retain valuable subcultural capital. As Nightingale (1996) argues, "The expression of subcultural difference and resistance is both a threat to the dominant culture and a source of innovation and creativity for it" (p. 15). The future of subculture requires careful deliberation, as *Vice* demonstrates.

I have argued that Thomas Frank and other theorists of hip consumerism have not taken into account the unique confluence of circumstances that has allowed *Vice* to

experiment with transgression. Frank describes an uncomplicated process of recuperating rebellion. Such an analysis lacks nuance, and ignores the negotiations and shifts that occur over time. Frank's work helps explain the shiny cocaine mirror cover of vol. 9 no. 9, but not the McGinley cover of vol. 7 no. 10, and certainly not Suroosh Alvi's letter to Gavin McInnes complaining about the cropping on the image. Frank omits the trial-and-error aspects of transgression. *Vice* demonstrates that transgression is recuperable – pace Althusser – but only in the last instance. Frank does not anticipate a magazine that takes pride in telling readers how much lost advertising revenue was incurred by publishing a particular image. For *Vice*, “edge” allows the magazine to retain subcultural capital and limit its readership, thus creating a narrow but profitable niche market. Edge provides the explanation for why transgression is recuperable in the last instance – despite the magazine's focus on hedonism and living in the moment, the co-founders of *Vice* rely upon a strategy of delayed financial gratification. As Sax (2006) points out, rather than blunt their edge, *Vice* has franchised “the brand, launching international editions to pull in revenue from the four corners of the globe, while keeping content edgy” (p. 18). Although, as Thompson (2004) puts it, “capitalism wins again,” this victory does not unfold in the manner in which Frank predicts.

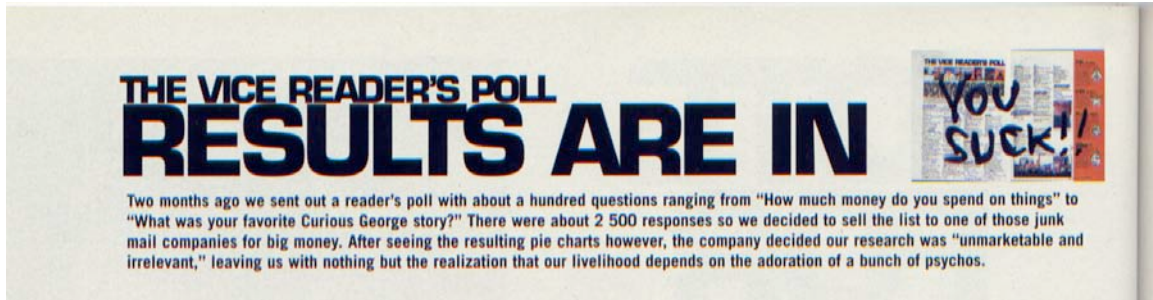
The edge of *Vice* is two-sided. For readers, edge is a way to describe the visual or written content of the magazine, while for advertisers, edge is a demographic category and an industrial strategy (Curtin & Streeter, 2001). Thus, every photograph of puke, every depiction of drug use, every example of postmodern race irony helps *Vice* constitute a specialized readership. However, there is no such thing as a “free lunch,” and Smythe's use of the term to describe the content of a magazine or television program

makes sly reference to this fact. Reading *Vice* is a type of labour, no matter how much pleasure decoding the content or images provides. The incentive to keep labouring and be constituted by *Vice* is the pleasure of exercising (sub)cultural competencies. The pleasure of “getting it.” If there is a cost associated with the free lunch of *Vice*, it is that it shapes how readers perceive the world around them. *Vice* takes the logic of ephemerality, and applies it to the experience of the world. It is a disposable magazine filled with disposable images and disposable politics.

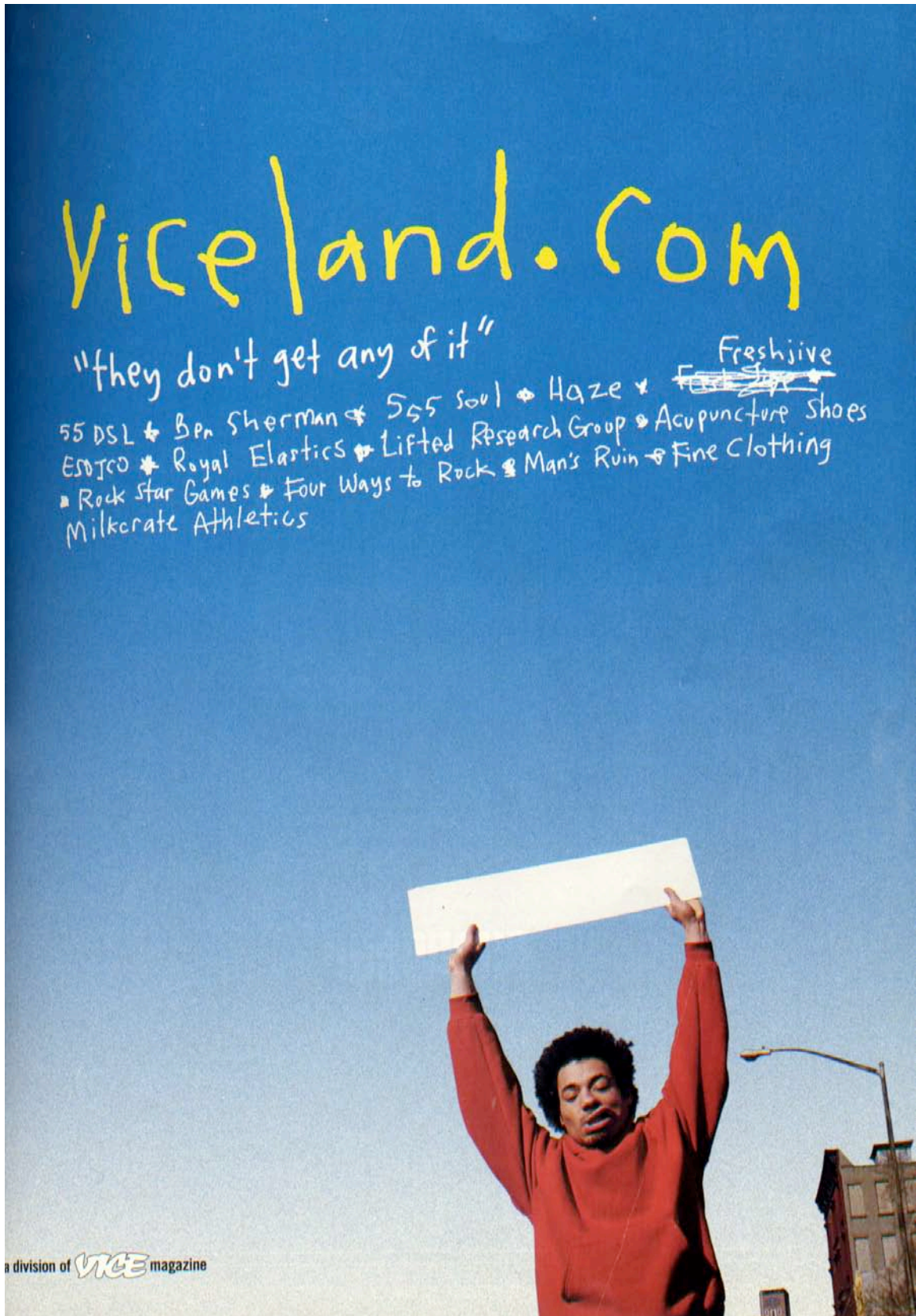
In vol. 9 no. 2, a letter in “Vice Mail” asks, “What taboos are left for *Vice* to exploit?” (p. 26). In seeking an answering to this question, I return to Stacey Thompson. In his descriptions of the political collective CrimethInc – an anonymous organization that sells and distributes punk music and agitprop – Thompson (2004) refers to the infamous final sentence of “The Culture Industry”: “The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even through they see through them” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972, p. 167). But where Horkheimer & Adorno describe a consumer that sees through advertisements but buys the product regardless, Thompson explains how CrimethInc ads underscore the “poverty of their commodities that will not spark world revolution, change the world, improve peoples’ lives, or transmit real communication and genuine experience” (p. 115). A warning at the bottom of one CrimethInc. poster advertisement begins, “Please do not buy our products because this advertisement looks exciting or because all your friends have them ... Please do not think that merely purchasing these products is going to do anything to change the world, or to improve your life or anyone else’s (as quoted in Thompson, p. 111). As Thompson concludes, “CrimethInc has alienated the thought

process of consciously grasping the commodity form as hollow from the potential consumer, thereby reifying and commodifying the last critical mental function available to the consumer as she faces the commodity in the marketplace” (p. 115). This, then, is the final “reveal” – a strategy that *Vice* remains unwilling to employ. This is the limit of (sub)cultural competencies – a taboo that *Vice* is not prepared to transgress.

Appendices



Appendix A, vol. 6 no. 9, p. 62



Appendix B, vol. 7 no. 3 p. 11



How hot are you? In your little Bench vest and Snug skirt and bee-stung lips. Are you shovelling snow or are you shovelling away the men that crawl over on their hands and knees grovelling for a kiss. "Hey, my parents have to get out of the driveway. Stop licking my Gravis shoes you grossie!"

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Appendix D, vol. 11 no. 9 p. 16

We surprised twenty-something hottie Desiree as she was arriving to her job as a bartender at downtown Manhattan hipster hotspot Max Fish. But just because the place is frequented by world-famous skaters, graffiti bad boys, and A-list celebs like James Gandolfini and Johnny Depp doesn't mean she can't look like an uptown girl, right? It's time for your Guerrilla Makeover, Desiree. We promise to have you back in time for the night shift!

**ALICIA & JUDE—
THE MAKEOVER QUEENS**

Photos: Glynnis McDaris
Hair: Staci Child for Cutler/Redken @
Kramer + Kramer
Makeup: Jillian Chaitin for Tarte



Hello? Is there a real live girl in there? Dressing down is OK for quiet weekends at home with your guy, but you are walking the streets of New York City here, Desiree! You look like Ashlee and Jessica's even punkier little sister!

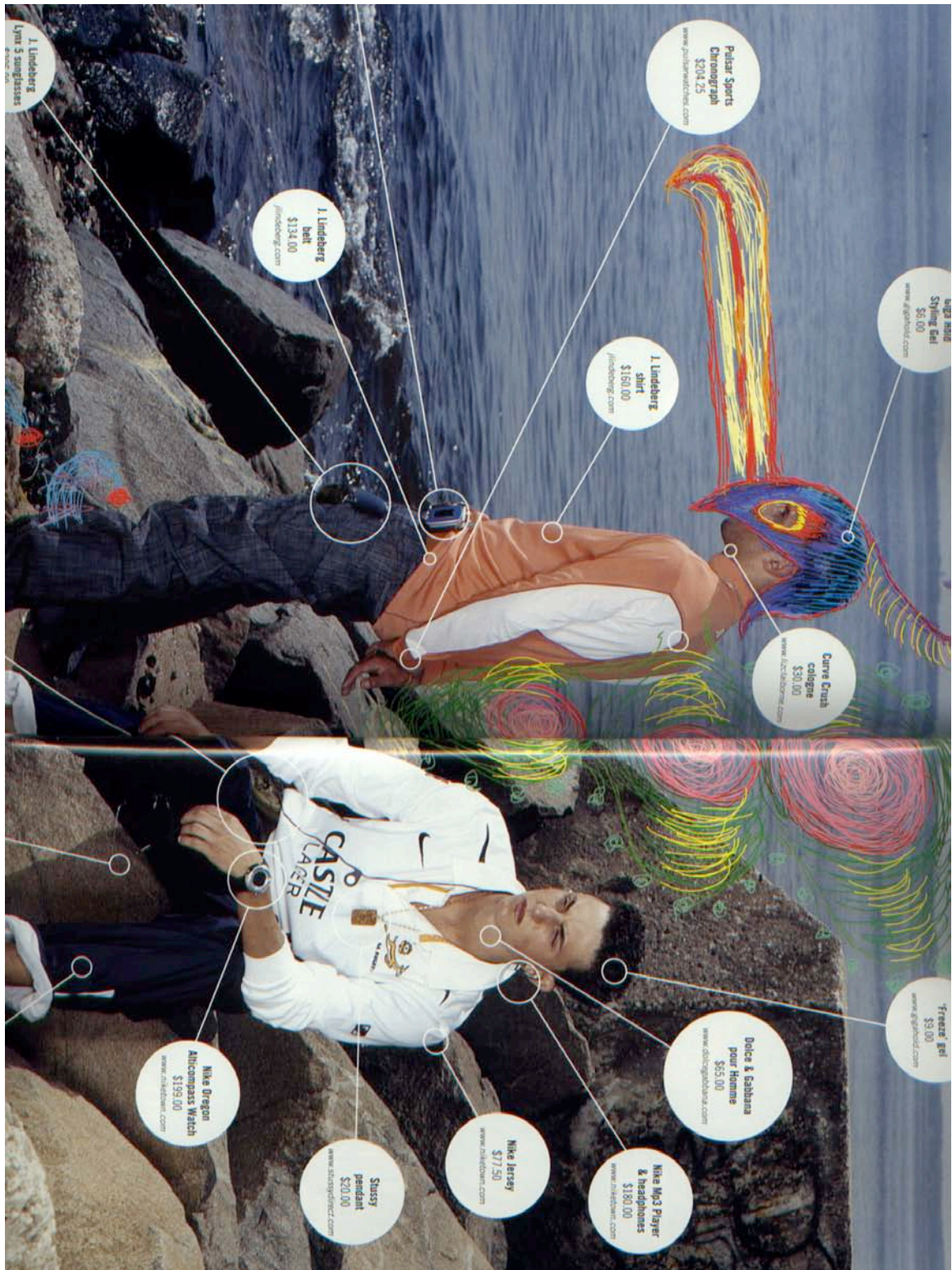


Yowza! That's more like it. With those spicy highlights, barely-there dress, and a bit of "bling-bling," there isn't a doorman in town who will turn you down now. You go, girl!

GUERRILLA MAKEOVER!

Our crack team of fab fashionistas can smell a style crisis a mile away. Watch out—you could be next!

Appendix E, vol. 11 no. 9, p. 93



Appendix F, vol. 11 no. 9, p. 108-109



Appendix G, vol. 5 no. 8, p. 90



Appendix H, vol. 6 no. 7, p. 57



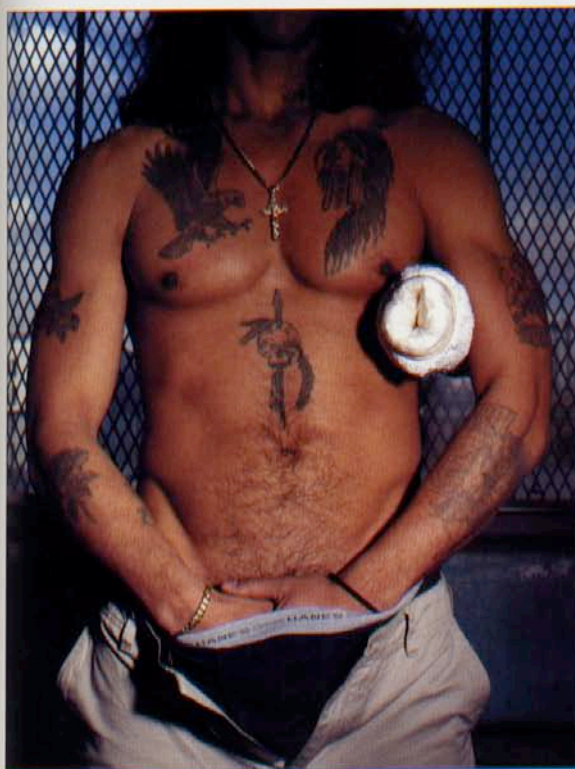
Appendix I, vol. 7 no. 6, p. 80



Track Pants: Cor Craft
T-shirt: D-Gital Systems
Shiv Proof Vest: National Geographic

You have to wear your greens everywhere in the facility. The only exception is when it's time to go out in the yard. In the yard you can wear the state track pants and a t-shirt that is not grey, blue, orange or black. Grey and blue are reserved for officers. Orange is reserved for The Orange Crush (the special task force used to break up riots). And black is forbidden because it makes the inmates harder to see. The t-shirt must be free of logos and designs.

If you have beef with someone the best way to get prepared is to tie magazines around your torso. It takes sixteen magazines to make the vest because they have to be two deep. The first eight (four in the front and four in the back) are stuffed down the pants and the next eight are tucked into the first eight. The magazines can't go higher than that or they impede your movement. The shiv is best hidden with a bandana.



Pants: Triple 5 Soul

Fifi towel: A Fifi towel is a homemade vagina. Simply take a small towel, fold it in half and roll it into a tight cylinder. Then keep it that way using elastic bands. To make the vagina realistic, inmates insert a rubber glove into one of the ends. The wrist of the glove is folded over the edge of the towel and tucked under the elastic bands. After it is secure the glove is filled with hot water. A second glove filled with Vaseline is then inserted into the first glove and tucked under the same elastic. The hot water melts the Vaseline and makes it feel warm and soft. Like a woman.



Appendix K, vol. 12 no. 4, p. 80



VICE FASHION

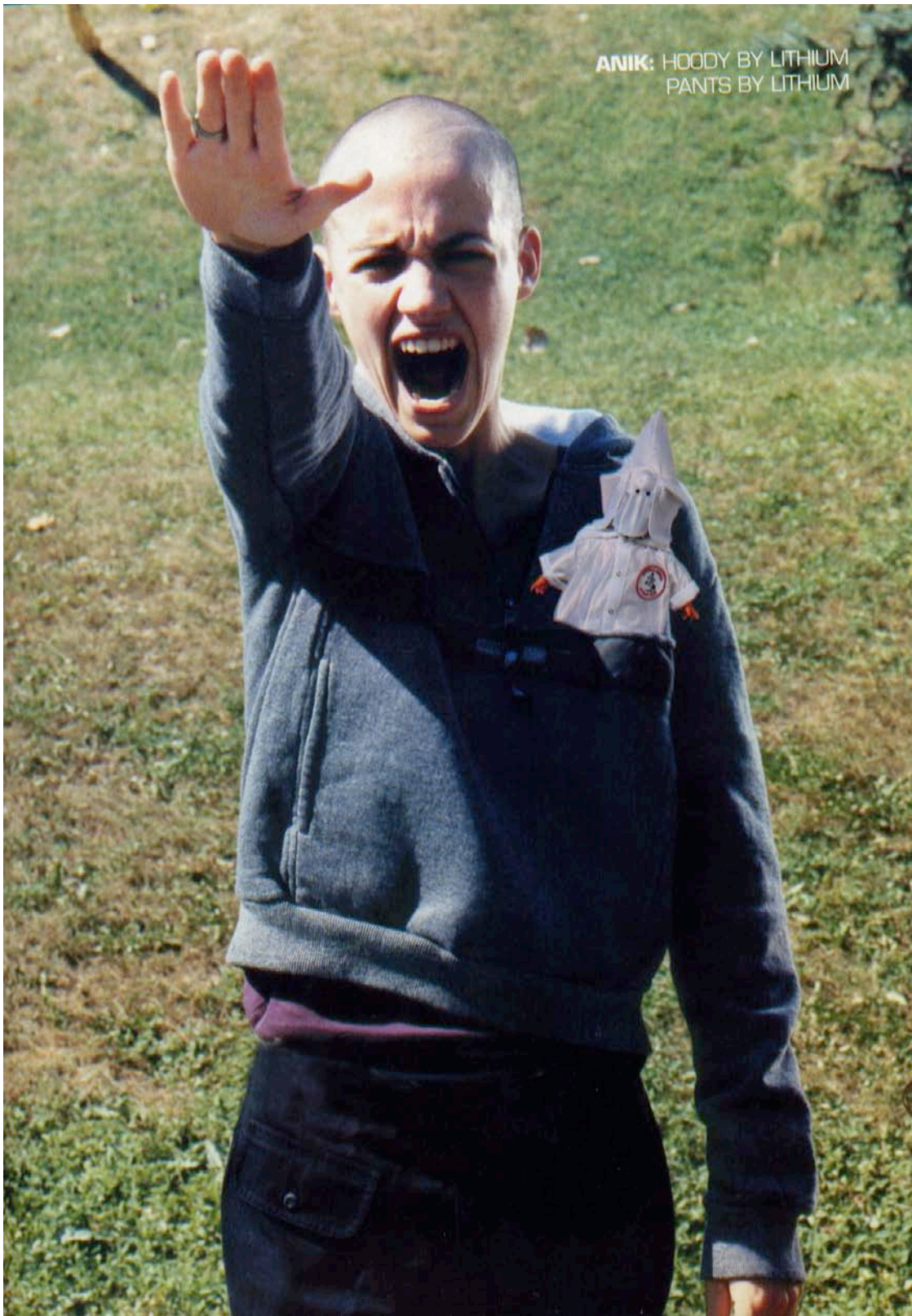
Stealth Bomber necklace by Mended Veil; tote bag by Jeremy Scott
Jeremy Scott is available at Peoples Revolution NYC, 310-497-4999 / Mended Veil; Julie Ohara at The News Inc. 212-925-9700 x114

77
VIONI
WEE

The downturn in the economy has affected nude recreation only to a slight degree. Some people are still afraid of flying after 9/11. Unfortunately, they won't be able to vacation at a beautiful clothing-optional resort like mine until they resume flying again!



Appendix M, vol. 11 no. 3, p. 58



Appendix N, vol. 6 no. 8, p. 61



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT

TEENA: TOP BY STÜSSY, SKIRT BY STÜSSY

DAVE P: TEE BY MELTING POT,
SHORTS BY MELTING POT

ANIK: SHIRT BY LITHIUM, SKIRT BY LITHIUM

FUZZ: ROBE BY KKK

NAPPY: TEE BY TRIPLE FIVE SOUL, SHIRT BY MELTING
POT, PANTS BY MENACE

FOR INFO:

LITHIUM
888.8.LITHIUM
TRIPLE FIVE SOUL
WWW.TRIPLEFIVESOUL.COM
STÜSSY
323.937.6077
MENACE
WWW.MENACEU.COM
MELTING POT
514.846.0674

Thanks to Joseph Ponton Costumes in Mtl.
for helping out 514.849.3238

TEENA does graphic design for a nebulous magazine called *Naked Eye* that probably won't end up paying her. She has one of the best asses in Montreal but made it very clear to us that she has a boyfriend (which was a bit of a "whoops!" when we saw him because we know him and he's a really cool guy). She didn't talk much during the shoot because everyone was speaking French.

DAVE is half graffiti-cool-guy-who's-good-in-bed-and-goes-on-tour-with-Herbaliser-and-Heavyweight and half "extreme"-dude-that-works-out-his-top-half-after-a-hard-day-mountain-biking-so-his-body-will-stay-

hyped-for-rock-climbing. He doesn't get fucked-up, which is good because he rolls the worst joints in Montreal.

ANIK is a pretty frog who works at a punky hair salon called Coupe Bizarre and studied film at Concordia University. She wants to move to New York to make movies and she's so hot she could probably stay at our house. The stylist from the shoot has a date with her tonight and he told us not to say anything bad about her. She farts in bed.

Our friendly wizard got his name (FUZZ) when he had a huge afro, but now the 'fro's gone so

everyone thinks the name's a comment about his pubes. He lives way out in the middle of nowhere and didn't want to keep the robe after the shoot, which is weird because it cost tons of money to have made. Especially the patches.

NAPPY works as a consultant for a fancy clothing store in Montreal where he doesn't do shit except walk around and from store to store pretending there are important things to do. He gets laid like crazy but did really badly during a recent visit to Brooklyn, so will probably not end up moving here.

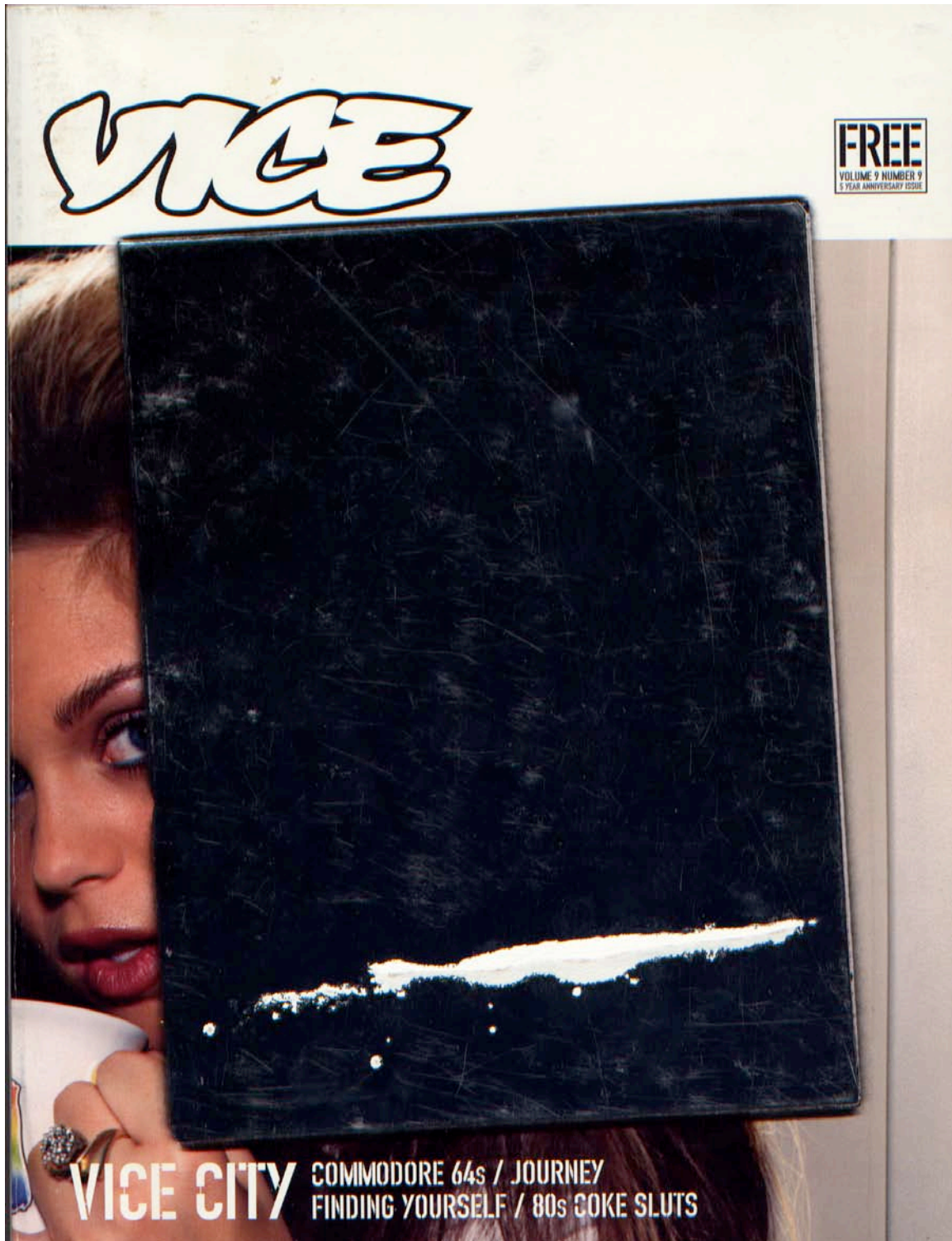
87 BENE ECTA
Naked Eye



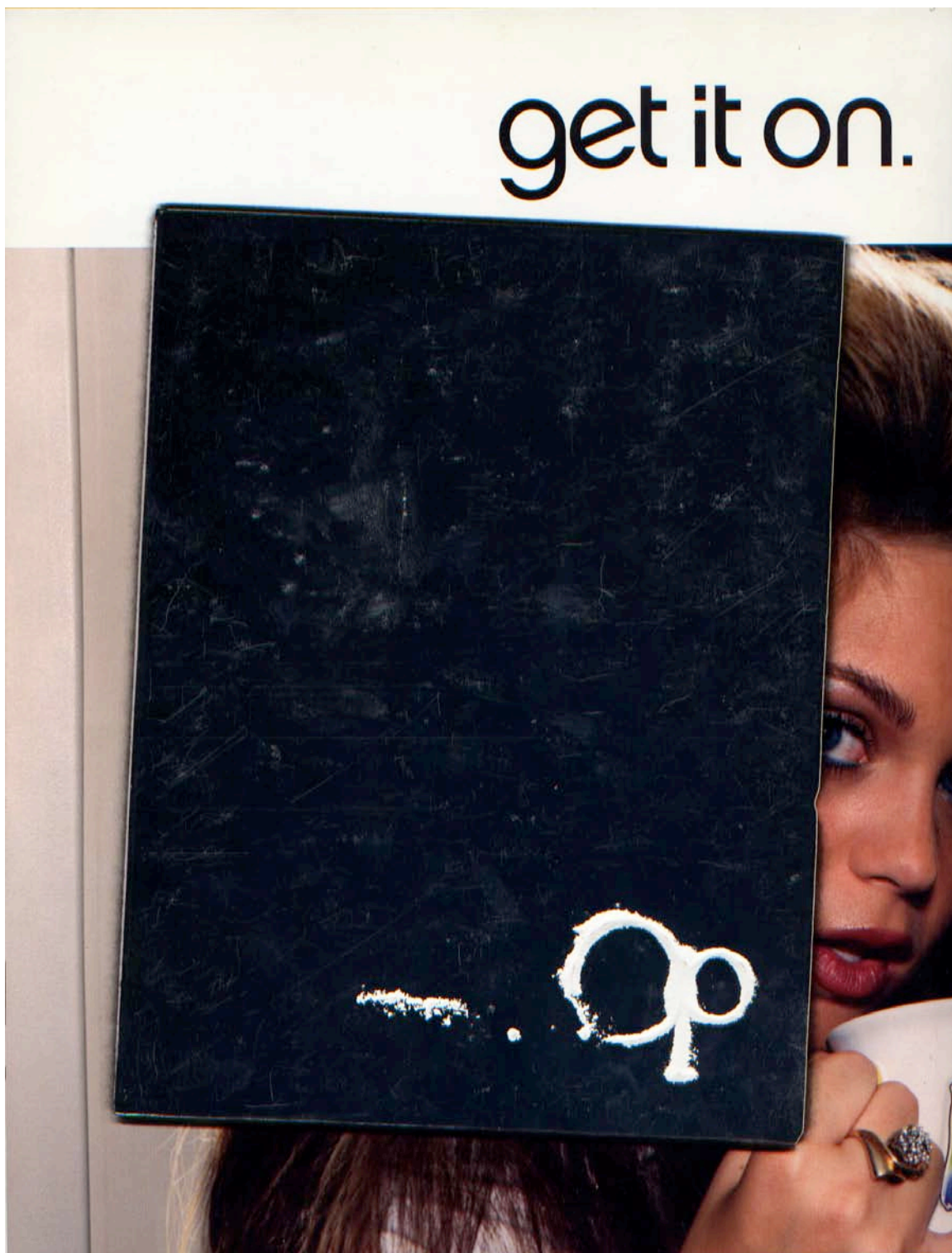
Appendix P, vol. 8 no. 10, p. 69



Appendix Q, vol. 7. No. 10, cover image



Appendix R, vol. 9 no. 9, front cover image



Appendix S, vol. 9 no. 9, back cover image



Appendix T, vol. 10 no. 3, p. 86



Appendix U, vol. 10 no. 3, p. 88



How do you feel about Bush publicly announcing his support for Saddam's assassination?

It is insanity. What right does he have? He is not Arabic, not Iraqi, and not Muslim. This is no way of doing politics. Such policies are to be condemned. He has no right to ask for a change in the government or impose his whim. We will not allow that. We are not Afghanistan. He will try, he will fail. He will find a strong people waiting for him. This is a violation of international law, of the UN charter. To bombard people. To impose government. Is this 2002 or the eighteenth century?

I've heard you say that you like Americans. It's the American government you have problems with.

Why must the government of the US push others to hate the American people? I find the American people to be very nice, very peaceful. It is your media and your government. Spreading war is not in the interest of the future.

And do you think you will get support from

the Arab world if there is a war?

First, our people, then the other Arab nations, and the third world, they are beside us. They know: today us, tomorrow them.

Can you see why America would hate Saddam?

We were friendly with America for many years. We have strong economic ties. We imported many American products in the '70s and '80s.

You imported weapons from America during and after the vicious war between Iran and Iraq and you did it with our consent. We helped build the power of Saddam Hussein.

Now he is considered the enemy number one of the Zionists, of Israel, for defending Palestine. Now he is the enemy of the American people. After the Kuwait problem we became enemy number one. We never attacked America; we have no interest in attacking America. We have our own problems.

Where did the relationship go wrong?

We are the only government ever to say no to America. The government of Iraq is strong, and this is dangerous. How does it look when the only government to say no — to defy America, is threatened? If you deal with others with respect, they will respect you. We know the meaning of dignity. Iraqi people are proud. The first law in the world was the Hammurabi Code, 2,000 years before Jesus Christ. We are proud of this. Why do they want to destroy it? Why do they want to destroy us? Why do they want to destroy all these people, and this civilization? I don't know. If you are looking to understand why, you must look for the answer with someone else. I am a politician now.

Is Iraq doomed?

I don't know what to do. We have billions in an escrow account, but we do not have access to that money. We are dying — my people they are dying — but there is no way to get the money, no way to lift sanctions. We must find an escape; we will have to find another way.

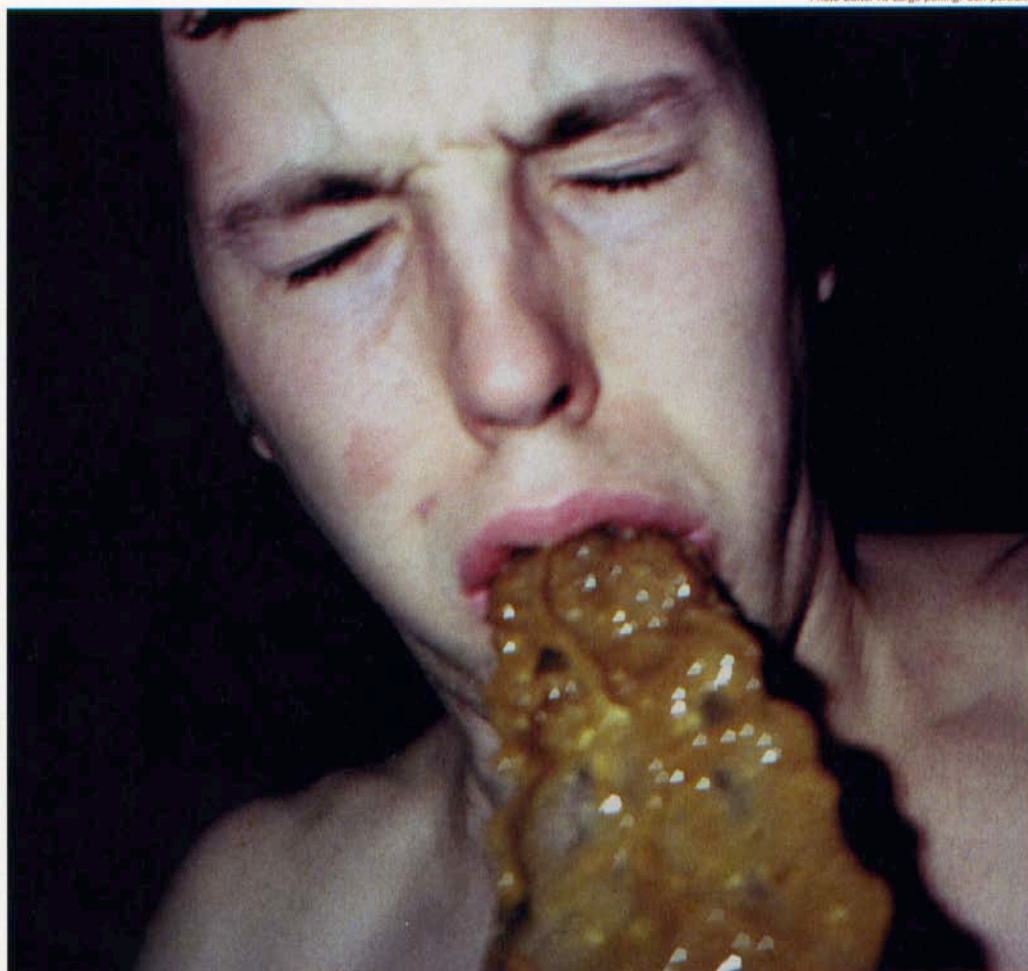
BECCA WOLFSON

VICELAND.COM

V9N7 77



Photo Editor-At-Large puking. Self portrait.



Cover photo by Tim Barber

VICELAND.COM

VOLUME 9
NUMBER 4

32 **SKI DEMSKI** IS DEAD. HOW ABOUT YOU?

35 THE LANDSCAPE OF THE WORD. AN **ONTOLOGY** OF THE
LANGUAGE OF CONTEMPORARY (HYPER)SPACES.

37 **DOLLTASTIC!!!!** **HITLER** AND **CASTRO** MEET THE **CHAINSAW**
MASSACRE GUY.

43 THE VICE GUIDE TO **DJ QUIK.**

47 **OH! RESPECT! AIII!** THE MASSIVE RISKS BEHIND TODAY'S **UK**
GARAGE.

61 YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH. **VICE'S FAVORITE LIES.**

Appendix W, vol. 9 no. 4, p. 16

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