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### Political Dumpster Diving:

#### How the Mainstream Media Throws Subcultures to the Curb

At dusk, in an alleyway between two main streets in Sacramento, a homeless man digs through a dumpster for food, clothing, cans and bottles. Two blocks away, a few more people are digging through the dumpster behind a local bakery. “Bagels!” one of the women shouts, as she triumphantly raises a sealed bag of day-old bagels from the garbage. Unlike the nearby homeless man, these dumpster divers are not diving by necessity, but rather by choice. “Why pay three dollars for a bag of bagels?” the woman asks. “These are free.” Like many dumpster divers, this woman dives for political reasons. The amounts of reusable items that are discarded each day frustrate her. By obtaining food, household items, clothing, and even electronic equipment from dumpsters, she is separating herself from the economy that produces this abundance of waste. A few more blocks away, a man and woman in their early twenties stop at a dumpster behind a thrift store. “Oh my god,” the woman says. “Look at this amazing painting.” She takes the painting from the dumpster, and carries it with her as they continue to walk up the street.

The practice of dumpster diving is not limited to a specific subculture. Although dumpster diving was originally associated with the economically disadvantaged, its participants have expanded to include political activists protesting the abundance of waste in our society, and

trend perpetrators who dive because items salvaged from dumpsters are cool. In this paper, I will argue that the mainstream media's coverage of the dumpster diving subculture has ensured its evolution from a subculture of political activism to a subcultural trend. I will give a brief overview of the media's previous constructions of dumpster diving, then analyze a New York Times article published in June 2007, entitled "Not Buying It", to illustrate the current media constructions of political dumpster diving. I argue that this article constructs political dumpster diving as a passing trend, rather than a political movement, ultimately rendering the subculture powerless to evoke any real change in the dominant framework of meaning.

### **A History of Media Coverage**

From as early as 1983, mainstream publications such as *Life Magazine*, *The Seattle Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Esquire*, and *The New York Times* have all included articles about dumpster diving, in varying contexts (Oxford English Dictionary Online). The first mainstream reference to the term 'dumpster diving' appears as a caption for a 1983 *Life* photo depicting "Rat and Mike" who were "rummaging for food in trash bins behind restaurants" (OED Online). This article, due to its early publication date, refers to dumpster diving in its originally recognized context as an act necessary for survival, utilized by the economically disadvantaged in order to find food. The next mention of dumpster diving appears in the May 17, 1985 issue of *The Boston Globe*, as a G.B. Trudeau cartoon caption that reads, "I met her dumpster diving behind Trader Vic's." 'A magical night. Some of the spare ribs had barely been touched'" (OED Online). Like the above reference, this reference also places dumpster diving in the category of economic necessity. However, the cartoon's depiction of its two characters as capable of romantic emotions serves to humanize the activity of dumpster diving. The cartoon also points

to the affluence and wastefulness of a society that will throw away whole racks of spare ribs, two catalysts that soon contribute to the advent of political dumpster diving, which officially originates in 1989.

By 2002, the *New York Times* prints an article about the refuse found around building sites, and acknowledges that “dumpster diving for building supplies may have found its cultural movement” (OED Online). This article is the first mainstream reference that acknowledges the cultural potentials of dumpster diving, but it also connects the movement to a form of dumpster diving that is less taboo than eating food that the mainstream constructs as dirty. However, the construction of the sentence in which the inanimate “dumpster diving...may have found its cultural movement,” leaves out the very humans who must be participating in the act of dumpster diving. Although the article acknowledges a cultural potential for dumpster diving, it neglects to mention the participants in this culture or how dumpster diving became a cultural activity.

As the above examples demonstrate, the mainstream media spent many years neglecting to acknowledge the social and cultural implications of dumpster diving, as well as the people that participate in it, because of the media’s inability to situate the subculture and its participants within the dominant frameworks of meaning. When people began dumpster diving for political reasons, the mainstream media were similarly silent. Political dumpster diving is the act of participating in dumpster diving in order to make a statement against a profit-driven, capitalistic society in which affluence leads to an abundance of waste (freegan.info). Political dumpster divers critique this society by reusing its waste instead of purchasing new items. They thereby feed off of the wasted supply of the economy without feeding into it by buying products and creating demand. This form of dumpster diving is most visibly practiced by the freegans.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Freegans are people who employ alternative strategies for living based on limited participation in the conventional economy and minimal consumption of resources. Freegans embrace community, generosity, social

Although the freegans have existed since 1989 as a project of the Activism Center at Wetlands Preserve in New York City and expanded steadily since the launch of the site [freegan.info](http://freegan.info)<sup>2</sup> in 2002, no mainstream media coverage of the freegans took place until late 2003, when the *Sacramento Bee* published an article about local dumpster divers who use diving to find free food from the dumpsters behind grocery stores and bakeries. Although the article is informative, and long overdue in its subject matter, the main issue of its construction of dumpster diving remains. It acknowledges the political motivations for dumpster diving as a critique of a profit-driven society, in which affluence leads to an abundance of waste. However, the tone of the article neutralizes any change-evoking exposure for political dumpster diving. A phrase typical of the article quotes a Boston University sociology professor who states, “These folks are engaged in a pretty profound critique of the dominant lifestyle”(Evans 1). While on the surface this statement explains the motivation of political dumpster diving, the tone of the phrase created by the words “these folks” and “pretty profound” is one of nonchalance and unimportance. Both of these phrases serve to undermine the potential of the political dumpster diving subculture.

In sum, the mainstream media continued to cover the freegan’s political form of dumpster diving from 2003-2007. Each reference attributed a varying amount of importance to the freegan movement, but few, if any, reinforce the freegan’s credibility as a political movement.<sup>3</sup> This mainstream media stance does not vary until May 2007 when the *New York Times* recognizes the freegans as participants of a valid political movement in an article entitled “Not Buying It.”

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concern, freedom, cooperation, and sharing in opposition to a society based on materialism, moral apathy, competition, conformity, and greed”(freegan.info).

<sup>2</sup> “Freegan.info reflects our commitment to creating models of living that allow us to limit the control that corporations and money have over our lives, reduce our financial support for the destructive practices of mass producers, and act as a living challenge to waste and over-consumption. We are committed to looking at problems in ways that transcend the boundaries of traditionally defined single issues (eg: animal rights, human rights, environmentalism). Instead, we challenge the commodification of life on all fronts and work to create a world where kinship with all living beings, respect for the earth and just, peaceful, and equitable relations between human beings replace the all-consuming drive for profit” (freegan.info).

<sup>3</sup> See <http://freegan.info/?page=MediaCoverage> for specific references.

However, as its title suggests, this same article also constructs the freegan movement as powerless by concurrently redefining dumpster diving as a sub-cultural trend and situating it within the dominant framework of meaning.

### **Dumpster Diving as Subculture**

Dick Hebdige has extensively studied the phenomena of how the media constructs subculture. His conclusion in his article “Subculture” reworks and updates Gramsci’s original conception of the idea that when a subculture arises from the mainstream culture, it invokes “the cycle” that leads “each successive subculture” “from opposition to defusion, from resistance to incorporation” (Hebdige 358). In other words, when a subculture appears, the mainstream reconstructs that subculture through its portrayal of the subculture in the mainstream media. This portrayal inevitably defuses the otherness of the subculture, which leads to its eventual incorporation into the mainstream. According to Hebdige, the presence of a subculture invokes this cycle because subcultures are “a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation” which must be reabsorbed in order to relieve this blockage (Hebdige 355). By this definition then, subcultures are inherently opposed to the mainstream culture. This creates tension because the mainstream has no way of defining these cultures within their present constructions of meaning. They cannot speak of or communicate with these subcultures because they have no prior point of reference from which to speak or communicate. This break from the mainstream framework occurs because “spectacular subcultures express forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial and behavioural codes, law breaking, etc.)” (Hebdige 355).

For example, dumpster diving expresses the forbidden consciousness of class through its middle-class participants' utilization of an activity originally born out of the necessity of the lower-class and disadvantaged. This causes a break in the dominant framework because people from the middle-class have no economic need to participate in dumpster diving, which contrasts with the mainstream construction of a profit-driven society, and causes a blockage in the mainstream representation of class. Similarly, dumpster diving expresses a forbidden form because, in many cases, the act of dumpster diving is illegal. There are many rules and regulations regarding the property rights of discarded goods and trespassing.<sup>4</sup> Dumpster diving consciously breaks these rules without acknowledging the wrongness of its lawbreaking. This contrasts with the construction of a society based on laws and the enforcement of these laws. Dumpster diving also denies the mainstream construction of trash as dirty and unusable because its participants dig through the trash and often eat the discarded food that they find, by choice rather than necessity. Dumpster diving therefore contradicts the construction of digging through trash as a dirty and socially unacceptable act.

The subculture of dumpster diving uses the same signs as mainstream culture, in this case consumption and waste, but it uses them in ways that subvert their dominant constructions. According to Hebdige, "It is basically the way in which commodities are *used*" or in this case, obtained, "in subculture which mark the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations" (Hebdige 359, emphasis original). In this way, dumpster diving is a subculture separate from the mainstream because it obtains commodities in a subversive way. Dumpster diving communicates its separation from the mainstream through its means of obtaining commodities.

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<sup>4</sup> "When a person throws something out, they are showing that they no longer have a use for it personally, so that item is now public domain, according to a 1988 Supreme Court Ruling (California vs. Greenwood). However, if a dumpster is butt up against a building, or inside a fenced enclosure that says No Trespassing, you can be arrested or ticketed by the police" (<http://freegan.info/?page=Dumpsterlaw>).

According to Hebdige, subculture “communicates through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown.” (Hebdige 357). In the case of dumpster diving, the meanings attached to commodities are overthrown through the means by which they are obtained and consumed. As these means become more strongly established through widespread practice, dumpster diving develops a firmer stance in its opposition to the mainstream. However, “As the subculture begins to strike its own eminently marketable pose, as its vocabulary (both visual and verbal) becomes more and more familiar, so the referential context to which it can be most conveniently assigned is made increasingly apparent” (Hebdige 356). In other words, the more strongly the subculture of dumpster diving defines itself, the easier it is for the mainstream media to incorporate the subculture into a preexisting set of meanings.

This is not as contradictory as it seems. When the dumpster diving subculture first began, its motivations were vague and hard to pinpoint. During this time period, as explored above, the mainstream media ignored political dumpster diving. As it becomes more clear that dumpster diving is a political movement against the waste of a profit-driven and affluent society, the media are more easily able to define the subculture, and therefore more easily able to *redefine* the subculture in terms of the mainstream’s signs and signifiers. This is because “The media ... not only record resistance, they ‘situate it within the dominant framework of meanings’” (Hebdige 356). The political dumpster diving subculture did not receive any mainstream press until it was more widespread and clearly defined, which did not take place until 2003, almost fifteen years after its conception. But now that dumpster diving has more clearly defined its stance as a subculture, the media are able to more clearly define dumpster

diving within the mainstream framework, thereby rendering it ineffectual as a political movement and unable to change the mainstream construction of meaning.

### **Dumpster Diving in the New York Times**

Steven Kurutz's article, "Not Buying It," portrays dumpster divers as a valid political movement, but one that is already passé, therefore powerless to incite change. Kurutz constructs this meaning through his descriptions of the freegan event participants and his use of specific and descriptive language. Kurutz bases the article on a dumpster diving community event promoted by freegan.info. This particular event took place in May 2007, the day after students vacated the NYU dorms for the summer vacation (Kurutz 1). Aptly called Dorm Dive, the event attracted people of all ages and economic backgrounds. However, Kurutz's descriptions of the participants serve to reinforce existing stereotypes about freegans and dumpster divers, which allows readers to dismiss the movement as a passing trend that will peaceably reincorporate with the mainstream, rather than a political force formed to alter the mainstream construction of meaning.

His descriptions of participants begin with "a dapper man in his 20s wearing two bowler hats", "a 17-year-old high school student with a half-shaved head", and "a janitor from a nearby homeless center" (Kurutz 1). Right away, these descriptions set up the binary of the reader, as an assumed participant in mainstream society, versus the freegan participants, or the other. Kurutz established this binary by choosing to describe the features and details of these people that sets them apart from the mainstream reader, rather than the details that would align the two. The image of the man with the two bowler hats implies that he may not be completely sane because he is going against the culturally accepted modes of dress by wearing two hats. The outdated



term “dapper” gives the description, and therefore the person described, a flippant sense of unimportance, while concurrently implying that the person, as well as his political alliances, are outdated. Kurutz’s choice to include a description of the 17-year olds half-shaved head also emphasizes her difference. By mentioning her young age as well, the description implies that she will eventually discard her radical choice of hairstyle in favor of something more socially acceptable as she ages. And like her hairstyle, Kurutz implies, she will also eventually discard her radical political views as a freegan for less liberal and more acceptable ones. This description suggests that the 17-year old will willingly reincorporate with the mainstream, therefore posing no threat to the dominant construction of meanings.

This point is further emphasized later in the article when Kurutz notes that “many freegans are predictably young and far to the left politically” (Kurutz 2). In this statement, the word “predictably” acts as a disclaimer for the presented information. It acknowledges the majority demographic of the freegan movement, but also encourages the reader to dismiss the freegans as just another movement that will eventually fade as its participants age and become less liberal. Kurutz’s description of the man who works as a janitor at a homeless shelter is noteworthy because the article makes no further mention of the man. In addition, he is not even a member of the freegan group hosting the event. He was simply passing by. Because his job is less than socially upstanding, including this detail only serves to further the image of social disadvantage traditionally associated with dumpster diving through its reference to homeless shelters and janitorial work. And although this man is not a freegan, describing him in the context of a freegan event causes the reader to associate him with the movement. All three of these descriptions emphasize the otherness of the freegans in relation to mainstream society.

After this initial construction of freeganism as a passing and powerless trend, Kurutz goes on to describe Adam Weissman, founder and spokesman of freegan.info. Kurutz introduces Weissman as the 29-year old “de facto spokesman” who “started freegan.info four years ago” (Kurutz 1). Kurutz’s initial mention of Weissman’s age takes away some of Weissman’s credibility because it is unorthodox for someone so young as 29 to head a political organization. Calling him a “de facto” spokesman, rather than an official spokesman, also decreases Weissman’s authority as the leader of a political movement. Most importantly, Kurutz says that Weissman started freegan.info four years ago, placing the date of establishment in 2003. However, according to freegan.info, the movement actually began in 1989,<sup>5</sup> *14 years* before Kurutz says it began. Although Kurutz began working with freegan.info four years ago, the movement and information on this movement has been available for over a decade. This gross misinformation is the difference between a credible and long-standing political movement that has grown in number and influence, and the passing and powerless movement that Kurutz is creating through his choice of detail and misleading semantics.<sup>6</sup>

He further discredits Weissman by stating that “he doesn't work and lives at home in Teaneck, N.J., with his father and elderly grandparents” (Kurutz 2). Although Weissman does not hold a traditional job, Kurutz has already said that Weissman is the spokesman for freegan.info, as well as responsible for the creation and upkeep of the website. As fellow freegan Madeline Nelson argues later in the article, “I'm not sitting in the house eating bonbons ... I'm working. I'm just not working for money” (Kurutz 3). Kurutz’s choice to include that information that Weissman lives with his father and grandparents serves to imply that he is

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://freegan.info/?page=AboutUs>

<sup>6</sup> Kurutz also mistakenly dates the beginning of the freegan movement to the “mid-‘90’s”, branching from the “anti-globalization and environmental movements” (p.1) when it actually began in 1989 as a project of the Activism Center at Wetlands Preserve in New York City (<http://freegan.info/?page=AboutUs>).

unproductive and basically mooching off his family. This presupposes that Kurutz is living with his family from necessity, rather than choice, and that living with one's family at the age of 29 is bad. Both of these assumptions rely on the mainstream construct that individuals should leave their families in order to live a full and productive life, while many other societies, historically and currently, value the connection provided in familial proximity. It also serves to situate Weissman within the context of his assumedly mainstream family, as an other surrounded by the more common and sustainable lifestyles of the mainstream.

Kurutz's following mention of Weissman includes a similar misuse of information. Kurutz supposes that "even Mr. Weissman, who is often doctrinaire about the movement, acknowledges when pushed that absolute freeganism is an impossible dream" (Kurutz 2). This statement makes it sound like Weissman doubts the success of the freegan movement. However, the goal of the freegan movement is not to convert every person in the world to the current freegan lifestyle, as the above statement, which Kurutz admits that he "pushed" Weissman to make, suggests. Instead, freegans work to raise awareness and ultimately change a system dependent on nonrenewable resources and excessive waste. While current freegans live off the waste produced by this society, the freegan ideal is a system that does away with this waste altogether. Not everyone in the world can live off the waste produced by an affluent society, but freegans believe that everyone can work to create a society in which this waste no longer exists.<sup>7</sup> Kurutz's obvious misinterpretations of freegan philosophy and the participants of the Dorm Dive event contribute to his construction of freeganism as a passing and powerless political movement

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<sup>7</sup> "Freeganism is a total boycott of an economic system where the profit motive has eclipsed ethical considerations and where massively complex systems of productions ensure that all the products we buy will have detrimental impacts most of which we may never even consider. Thus, instead of avoiding the purchase of products from one bad company only to support another, we avoid buying anything to the greatest degree we are able" (freegan.info).

that is already becoming a subcultural trend and will inevitably be reabsorbed into the mainstream.

Kurutz furthers this construction through his use of language, analogy, and the events that he chooses to cover. Kurutz's language initiates his deconstruction of the freegans as political activists. He begins by setting the scene of the event, which, as he describes, "quickly took on a giddy shopping-spree air, as members of the group came up with one first-class find after another," (Kurutz 1). The Dorm Dive event is based on the freegan philosophy of anti-consumerism.<sup>7</sup> By comparing it to a shopping-spree, Kurutz sets up a binary opposition that devitalizes and reverses the freegan's original intent. The phrase "giddy shopping-spree" deprives the event of any serious political connotations because it evokes the image of twelve-year old girls at the mall, rather than political activists making a statement about a profit-driven society. As the event gets underway, Kurutz notes that the participants are "drawing quizzical stares from passers-by" (Kurutz 1). This detail further emphasizes the difference between the mainstream reader and the unconventional freegans. It implies that the behavior of dumpster diving is different enough to gain attention from the more conventional members of society, but because the "passers-by" by definition keep walking, it also implies that mainstream society dismisses the actions of the freegans as other, without inquiring into their motivations or philosophies because they have already been absorbed into the dominant framework of meanings.

The article later references some of the other events promoted by [freegan.info](http://freegan.info), including "feasts at which groups of about 20 people gather in apartments around the city to share food and

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talk politics” (Kurutz 2). Although Kurutz references freeganism before this point, he only refers to it as an anti-globalization, anti-consumerism, environmentalist movement: never specifically as a political movement! Now that he finally mentions politics, it is only to say that freegans like to “talk politics” over dinner, a phrase that connotes inaction and a similarity to the mainstream. This statement also ignores the fact that the feasts themselves are political acts, as all the food included in them is scavenged.

While discussing the feasibility of freeganism as a widespread lifestyle, Kurutz supports the opinion that it is not a reasonable option,<sup>8</sup> as explored above. However, Kurutz continues, “It's not that freeganism doesn't require serious commitment” (Kurutz 3). The phrasing of this statement rests on multiple presuppositions. For one, the phrase’s flippant and informal tone undermines the serious political connotations of freeganism. Two, it implies that many people assume freeganism doesn’t require a serious commitment. While a person can participate in some freegan activities like dumpster diving without innately altering their lives, living fully by the principles of freeganism requires a drastic change in lifestyle, as shown by interviews within this article. Madeline Nelson, a 51-year old, quit her six-figure job at Barnes & Noble in order to live according to the principles of freeganism. For Nelson, it required a move from a two-bedroom apartment in Greenwich Village to a one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn. Nelson also gave up her six-figure paycheck and now spends her time working as a volunteer advocate for freegan causes. She survives by owning her house, rather than paying on a loan, and by dumpster diving for food and other necessary items (Kurutz 3). Living by freegan philosophy is a drastic decision that requires dedication and a strong belief in the use and tenets of freeganism.

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<sup>8</sup> “Even Mr. Weissman, who is often doctrinaire about the movement, acknowledges when pushed that absolute freeganism is an impossible dream” (p. 2).

However, Kurutz reports the extensiveness of this change in lifestyle while discrediting it by implying that it makes no difference to the mainstream construction of meaning.

Kurutz includes another detail about Nelson that reinforces the line between the mainstream reader and the freegan, or other. He mentions is that Nelson “spent her 20s ... living in communal houses” (Kurutz 3). Communal houses are associated with the hippie movement of the 60s, and by including the detail that Nelson lived in some of these houses, Kurutz is associating her with the hippie movement. This causes the reader to connect the freegans to the hippie movement. Because the hippie movement is in the past and no longer capable of inciting change, this detail implies that the freegan movement will also pass without inciting change. Kurutz later expands on this connection: “As rigorous and radical as the freegan world view can be, there is also something quaint about the movement, at least the version that Mr. Weissman promotes, with its embrace of hippie-ish communal activities and its household get-togethers that rely for diversion on conversation rather than electronic entertainment” (Kurutz 4). Again, this phrase plays down the political activism of the freegan movement, while playing up the qualities that it shares with the hippie movement and mainstream social gatherings. Kurutz calls the freegan world view “rigorous and radical” while calling the movement and its political meanings “quaint.” This only furthers his construction of the freegan movement as a trend, rather than a political movement with the opportunity to change society.

### **Subculture and the Dominant Framework of Meaning**

Since the advent of political dumpster diving in 1989, the mainstream media spent fifteen years ignoring the emerging subculture. By 2003, the freegan.info website gave a clearly defined voice to political dumpster diving. However, the mainstream media used the

subculture's newfound clarity in order to report on the freegan movement while concurrently redefining the subculture's alternate framework of meanings and reordering it within the dominant framework. Kurutz's article "Not Buying It" is only one illustration of how the mainstream media reconstructs the dumpster diving subculture through the use of specific and leading language, as well as by comparing dumpster diving to political subcultures like the hippie movement that were previously resituated within the dominant framework. As an analysis of Kurutz's article demonstrates, the mainstream media has successfully absorbed the dumpster diving subculture, rendering it powerless as a political movement. A close analysis of the mainstream media's construction of the dumpster diving culture expands to demonstrate the ways in which the mainstream can redefine and resituate any subculture. This holds dire implications for anyone who wants to alter the dominant framework of meaning. If subcultures' alternate frameworks are inevitably absorbed into the mainstream, is there any chance of invoking real change in the dominant framework? Perhaps the most direct way of interrupting this cycle is for a subculture to gain control of a portion of the mainstream media. This would allow an alternate framework of meaning as much credible exposure as the dominant framework enjoys. Subcultures have the potential to evoke change; they only need the exposure to make these changes evident.

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