

Stashing the Tacky Little Pamphlets

As more of our daily geography is occupied by a coercive media ecology, a tool to regain some ground

Jason Rodgers

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You might assume that a Tacky Little Pamphlet (TLP) is just another name for a mini-zine. In a way, you are correct. It usually refers to a format of a single sheet folded into eight sections, cut up the middle, and folded up like origami to form a miniature zine. However, the term includes additional meaning that expands far beyond into a form of tactical media or strategic prank.

Olchar Lindsann of Monocle Lash Anti-Press thought the origin of the term was from either zinesters “Blaster” Al Ackerman or The Haddock. We’d lost Blaster a few years back, so I wrote to The Haddock, one of the great mail artists of all time. He’s been active since at least the 1970s and will still happily send an envelope full of lunacy out to you.

A lot of the material he sends is like bad psychedelics or erotica for Lovecraftian Great Old Ones. The Haddock replied, “I called my zines Tacky Little Pamphlets, so Ack just assumed I coined the term. Actually, I stole the term from Frank Zappa. Listen to the lyrics of his song, ‘Dirty Love’.”

The song from Zappa’s 1973 LP “Over-Nite Sensation” contains the line, “Give me your dirty love, like some tacky little pamphlet in your daddy’s bottom drawer.” This is a reference to pre-internet pornographic magazines, stashed away for surreptitious viewing.

But rather than an issue of *Playboy* or *Hustler*, the lyrics always made me think of so-called Tijuana Bibles, palm-sized comics popular between the 1920s and early 1960s featuring depictions of mainstream comic characters or Hollywood stars engaging in lewd sexual acts. Their production value was low grade and tacky, a form of underground publishing that was entirely commercial. They are collectibles today.

The little porno mags had some influence on the underground comix scene of the 1960s such as material drawn by cartoonist R. Crumb, as well as when Paul Krassner published a centerfold poster of Disney characters having an orgy and doing drugs in a 1967 issue of *The Realist*. In a way, the Tijuana Bibles were a form of detournment, taking an established element of culture and mutilating it to change its meaning, but they were not done with any political reason; just purely for titillation of viewers.

The TLP is itself a sort of detournment. This is what separates it from a minizine. “Blaster” Al Ackerman writes:

“[W]e can say that the ambience of the true, classic TLP has got to combine the redolent qualities of something smudged produced in a closet by Yig-Soggoth and Pete, *Minions of the Archimandrite*, combined with the sort of tract you are likely to be handed on the street corner by a personage who not only appears to be wearing multiple layers of clothing, all carefully unmatched, topped with a wool stocking cap with eyeholes, but who also proceeds to say things along the lines of ‘Sniff, sniff, somebody in this timeline has brown eyes.’”

This is all a strange way of saying it detourns the format of a standard Bible tract or medical pamphlets that you would find in a doctor’s office. This format was for a purpose, as one of the major forms of distribution was to drop these off at locations such as waiting rooms.

Ackerman gave an example of one of these titles, “It’s called Friends,” he said. But what “each issue of this rather schlocky, rather sketchily xeroxed TLP dishes up are hospital horror stories; accounts of patients being accidentally maimed, cut, scalded, smothered, or otherwise harmed—always by accident and always by candy stripers, gray ladies, etc.” They were left in hospital waiting rooms along with issues of *Drunkard RNs*. This is a form of tactical media, which exploits specific spaces.

There is a certain similarity between the tactical form of the TLP and the old Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) use of the “silent agitator,” small stickers that Wobblies would put up in their workplace. For instance, one that included an image of a wooden shoe with a quote from IWW leader Bill Haywood: “Sabotage means to push back, pull out or break off the fangs of Capitalism.” You can find this and other reproductions of such stickers in Franklin Rosemont’s *Joe Hill: The IWW & the Making of a Revolutionary Working Class Counterculture*. The heyday of these silent agitators was the early 20th century when Wobblies still had clout. For the IWW this was a grassroots tactic to boost morale between workers in the struggle, encourage them to resist, and intimidate the boss.

But for a TLP what is the goal? It is clearly a sort of sabotage to the smooth workings of consensus reality. It is certainly something stranger than union agitation. It could be considered a challenge to the dominant paradigm, but in a much more intense way than how that is usually done.

The dominant form of literature used by zinester Ackerman finds its closest parallel in Sufi learning tales. These strange little stories are designed to not entirely make sense, but to seed important ideas in the reader’s or listener’s mind. These ideas would then bloom.

Ackerman’s stories used a combination of tall tales, pulp science fiction, and dirty jokes to convey knowledge and increase perception. Ackerman method may have resulted from a meeting with Idrie Shah, Sufi master and author of *Tales of the Dervishes*. Although Ackerman described him as being shifty eyed and chain smoking, he seemed to think highly of him.

The TLP works as an excellent form of tactical media. As more of our daily geography is occupied by a coercive media ecology, it is a tool to regain some ground. Maybe, occasionally, it even works as a wrench in the gears of the social factory.

Jason Rodgers’ articles appear frequently in these pages, most recently in “This World We Must Leave” (**FE #410, Fall, 2021**). Her latest book is *Invisible Generation: Rants, Polemics, and Critical Theory Against the Planetary Work Machine*, a review of which appears **in this issue**.

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