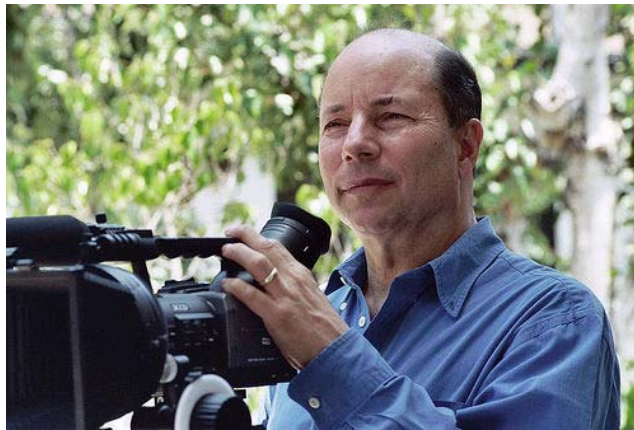


## Accessing Wal-Mart on the Internet: Diegetic Layers and Alternative Distribution and Exhibition Practices

Notes on the Upcoming DVD Release of Robert Greenwald's *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*  
By Rowena S. Aquino

Wal-Mart has emerged as a critical pivot and a popular<sup>1</sup> articulation and formulation of multi-national strategies as a particular discourse in the global economy's entrance into far-reaching, usually low-wage countries to promote and advance late capitalism, if the term can still be applied here. Robert Greenwald's upcoming documentary, with its

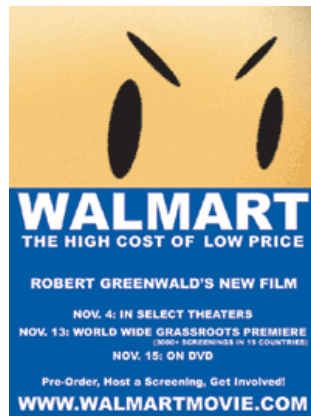


Robert Greenwald (Photo by Sarah Feeley)

working title *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, aside from adding itself to the growing line of documentaries about or aligned against Wal-Mart's (discriminatory) practices, outlines its critical position on the biggest retail chain in the world through the Internet. The documentary, produced by Brave New Films and to be released on DVD in November 2005, sharpens further the role of digital media and the Internet that provide alternative distribution and exhibition sources and channels for films, thus debunking the notion of a "premiere," that played-out trope of mainstream filmmaking in order to brand paradoxically its products like cattle as "unique" and therefore a "must-see." Also, Greenwald's website devoted to the production history of the documentary creates a forum for the general public, usually limited to the role of bystanders and observers, to

participate in the making of the work, in the sense of contributing monies to fund the documentary, arranging local screenings of the DVD upon its release and sharing Wal-Mart experiences that could be included in the “finished” product and as developing chapters on the growing list of grievances against the monster organisation.<sup>2</sup>

Writing about a film that has yet to be released in any form is obviously veering away from the usual tide of pieces borne from press screenings or screener videos, but Greenwald’s approach to the production, distribution and marketing of his documentary makes the writing of this review almost urgent and indicative of emerging (future) distribution and exhibition practices. The fact that the DVD release of a film will precede the theatrical distribution modifies greatly the concept of a film release, or even that of the trailer, which has become more and more like music videos that tell the entire plot through fast-paced editing and flash and thus curtails any profound desire to watch the film when it is finally out in theatres.



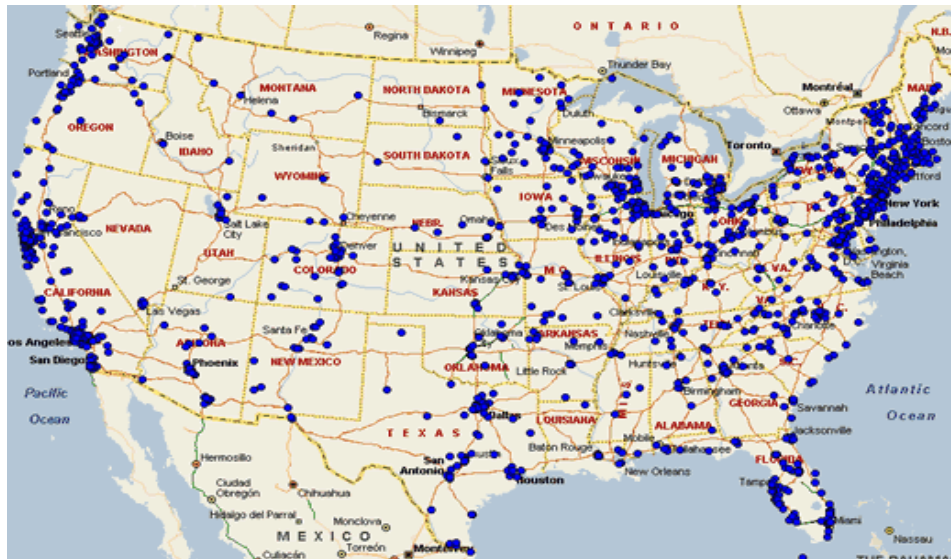
Looking further beyond the DVD release of Greenwald’s *Wal-Mart* would be too hasty, as a theatrical distribution has not yet been solidified, underlining the DVD format as a crucial factor in distribution – more so than film festivals. Think of it as *Citizen Kane* beginning with the discovery of Rosebud burning and backtracking until the famous

death scene and the pronunciation of said name of sled. In fact, a backtracking of other texts premised on Wal-Mart's ever-expansive profit regime is in order, whatever the argument on Wal-Mart may be: *Frontline: Is Wal-Mart Good for America?* (2004), David Faber's *The Age of Wal-Mart: Inside America's Most Powerful Company* (2004), *Store Wars: When Wal-Mart Comes to Town* (2001) directed by Micha X. Peled and organisations/websites such as Wal-Mart Watch, "Wake up Wal-Mart" and "Women vs. Wal-Mart" are those that have received both critical attention and a broadband dissemination, although surely there are other, lesser-known community-level organisations, texts and websites elsewhere in the world. One can add to the fold Michael Moore's early documentaries such as *Roger & Me* and *Pets or Meat* and even Alex Gibney's *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), which do not tackle Wal-Mart per se but rather the business practices akin to companies like Wal-Mart. Alongside Moore's popularity, sales of Greenwald's previous documentaries such as *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (2004) and *Uncovered: The War in Iraq* (2004) on DVD went past the couple hundred-thousand mark, indicating the undeniable presence of an audience for documentary work on multi-national or "global retailer" activity. Embracing the Internet's reach to that audience to bridge the gap between lucrative institutions engaged in production, distribution and exhibition, and its (potential) consumers, Greenwald lays bare through the making and marketing of his documentary the politics inherent in the use of the Internet as a valuable recourse to the making of a "movement"<sup>3</sup> and as that which mediates the filmmaking process from pre- to post-production and extending into marketing, distribution and exhibition – what Jim Gilliam, a member of Brave New Films, has called "hacking the media" precisely through media.

A great example of fighting media with media is the burgeoning proliferation of online counterparts of film festivals, exemplified by the Toronto Film Festival, in order to reach an audience who simply cannot afford to travel and attend the actual festival. As part of the Festival of Philippine Arts and Cultures, Visual Communications and the Association for the Advancement of Filipino American Arts and Culture, Inc. presented several weeks ago “Pinoy Visions,” a showcase of Philippine-/American short films on screen and online. The month-long “posting” of several Philippine-/American films from and beyond the festival’s occurrence illustrated by “Pinoy Visions Online” provides a different option for distribution and exhibition<sup>4</sup> for works normally excluded or simply ignored by distributors and exhibitors.

### **The Narrative of Technology**

In an editorial response posted in June to AlterNet<sup>5</sup> readers’ comments on his upcoming documentary on Wal-Mart, Greenwald explains the reasoning behind the move that both he and his production company, Brave New Films, consciously took to avoid the usual Hollywood re/route to bring a film to an audience: to “create change, not just movies.” Giving ordinary citizens the agency to contribute their own experiences and organise screenings of the documentary where “there will be material for discussion following the film, ...campaigns around the film, all designed to create change; in short, a diverse coalition of folks working hard to build a movement,” naturally *creates* an audience above and beyond the issue of reaching one. More so than the resulting



Map of local screenings scheduled by users upon the DVD release of *Wal-Mart*

documentary itself, Greenwald’s website makes acute the issue of a unified text on the Internet, standing independently but caught as it is by default once it is posted between numerous other “pages” devoted to the same issue, topic or situation. It has been through the Internet that Greenwald has received partial funding for his *Wal-Mart* project, thanks to the immediate reach of millions of users at the touch of a mouse. Recording the development of the documentary through the Internet has also made marketing a simple process. But more importantly, Greenwald’s strategy of making the Internet his forum for the dissemination of his views on *Wal-Mart*, making the DVD release seem almost like a throwback of an edited version of his website, follows the path paved by other websites devoted to criticism on *Wal-Mart* as a developing discourse on multi-national activity and elaborates on the narrative of technology /digital media that develops from and accompanies such activity, in the sense that, as Marshall McLuhan writes, “the medium is the message.” McLuhan states that, “it is only too typical that the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium” (McLuhan, 9), a commentary whose dynamics are being dismantled and turned on its head by filmmakers like Greenwald –

following McLuhan's lead – precisely to heighten and implicate user awareness of and literacy in the very act of engaging with a given medium, whatever the purpose may be. In the introduction to his seminal work on media studies, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan writes, “Electric speed in bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion has heightened human awareness of responsibility to an intense degree,” to which Greenwald's website and production of his documentary reply that the level of awareness has unfortunately remained below sea level – much to the joy of those who hold monopolies on the manufacture and distribution of such “electric speed.” Yet the medium in question, the Internet, is at one and the same time maintaining and sharpening the below sea level user awareness and involvement: PBS' homepage that allows users to watch *Frontline: Is Wal-Mart Good for America?* in its entirety or read an interview with the director of *Store Wars*, situating Internet “releases” of documentaries and “extras” on a par with DVD ones – be they leaks or official releases – situate the medium on the same critical and ideological level as the content that the medium processes and moves, as well as the user, who is given the capacity to manipulate (however minimal) the medium and/or content. In the future, I am of the opinion that “postings” will be a more appropriate term for a film's opening screening, no longer limiting the “transmission” of filmic content to one specific medium or location, hearkening to Fredric Jameson's preference for the term to indicate the mode of representation – and I would add, more significantly, the mode of distribution and exhibition, especially regarding digital media – and going beyond this signification to include the increasing invisibility of the processes that make communications networks function, further atomised and mystified as they have become.<sup>6</sup>

The boundary between viewing and participating disappears through the Internet, locating Greenwald's website – with its endless stream of Wal-Mart-related blogs – in the realm of video-game aesthetics for its users, or “players.” As a result, the otherwise “unified” text isolated on a theatre screen cloaked in darkness becomes a malleable item that refracts<sup>7</sup> the very medium that carries it, and in return, the text itself.<sup>8</sup> Distribution becomes exhibition as well, as users sign up to hold screenings in their homes, schools, churches and workplaces, and those who donate monies will receive a free copy of the DVD. The medium that is the Internet (through which other media is distributed) spills out from cyberspace to real-space to emphasise its concrete role in the materiality of human dealings, as if building a new landscape that eases in and out of human and digital space to the point of no longer distinguishing between the two. By the simple act of casting his filmmaking net on the Internet, Greenwald contributes to the task of making users aware of Wal-Mart beyond the concept of a huge storage space where items can be purchased for record low prices and participate in combating, or at least questioning, not



only Wal-Mart's strategies on trade, manufacture and distribution, but also, and perhaps more importantly, those of Hollywood. “For,” to quote yet again McLuhan,” the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.” Put simply, as an example, Greenwald brings to the fore the very processes of the medium's effect in human activities, with an emphasis on those

of major film studios and “big box” retailers like Wal-Mart, whose hands are deep inside the seemingly bottomless cookie jar.

### **Multiplying and De-centring Diegetic<sup>9</sup> Layers**

When Amazon.com Inc. acquired CustomFlix Labs, Inc. in July 2005, the home video market deepened its challenge to “bottom-line corporations” that standardise products for maximum profit margins. CustomFlix Labs, Inc. is a small American company that creates DVDs on demand, thus allowing alternative distribution outlets for filmmakers and their works to obtain, or create, an audience through Amazon’s own built-in “audience” usually denied them following normal distribution and exhibition practices for theatres. “Straight-to-video” thus no longer has its negative connotation when applied to the DVD format, which has come to signify not only the medium itself but also, and more importantly, distribution and exhibition practices whose very premise is against following the code of the lowest denominator, offering more and more specialised and on-demand titles. Following and transforming the practice of sending out screeners as a makeshift distribution circuit, Philippine director Yam Laranas and colleague Chuck Gutierrez sent official DVD copies of his newest film, *Sigaw* (internationally marketed as *The Echo*) to those who run websites devoted to horror films so that reviews and/or blogs, positive or negative, would populate the Internet and help create an audience not only for a horror film but also for a Philippine film. Once unleashed on the Internet, the film develops an intertextuality that it had not had before, producing its own “extras” beyond the DVD itself in the form of reviews and blogs.<sup>10</sup>

DVDs exercised, and continue to exercise, a wide influence upon the (development of the) making of documentaries and other texts under the heading of “extras,” and the



appeal of “behind the scenes” or “making-of” documentaries that provide different or multiple perspectives of a film. Unfortunately, the term “extras” belittles the presence of texts such as a making-of documentary, photo gallery, deleted scenes, all of which – combined with multiple audio and subtitle options, including dubbing and audio commentary – decentre the film as a unified, isolated and “finished” product. Such “extras” add actually multiple layers to the film’s diegetic surface. Similarly and more dynamically, when faced with the Internet and the unlimited intertextuality that it affords through the “Women vs. Wal-Mart” website, access to the *Frontline* documentary, and Wal-Mart’s own response to such criticism, Walmartfacts.com, among others, the contextual layers of the “main” diegetic surface of Greenwald’s documentary increase ten-fold.

*Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* presents the experiences of five former and present Wal-Mart employees.<sup>11</sup> To tell more beyond that requires that I watch the film, of course. Overlooking this minor detail, and reading the documentary as a narrativised version of Greenwald’s website, the website illustrates more the dynamic workings of the making of the film, Greenwald’s activities as a Left-leaning documentarian and the dialogues between him and users that go beyond the five “case studies” that ended up in the film. To further extend the issue of dialogues, one has only to visit [www.wakeupwalmart.com](http://www.wakeupwalmart.com) or [www.womenversuswalmart.com](http://www.womenversuswalmart.com), the latter providing a more concentrated, gendered viewpoint of Wal-Mart experiences made clear by the website’s name. Accompanying and posing as a challenge to even the “extras” found on DVDs, websites such as Greenwald’s that documents the evolution of a film or its subject striates the usually isolated “main” film text, but not in a hierarchic fashion vis-à-vis the

“principal” film text, or diegetic surface. On the contrary, the use of the Internet is a level playing field as a forum for ideas, texts and images. The fact that Wal-Mart itself established its own website to counter the criticisms enriches the various positions taken concerning the Wal-Mart issue and their respected arguments accessible on the Internet. The trap of binaries of a compare-and-contrast of texts disappears when confronted with the Internet, as it provokes a chain *refraction* that multiplies the meaning of the medium as the carrier of narrative, and the narrative(s) itself.

The dialogues between the aforementioned texts on Wal-Mart are constantly changing in terms of content and distribution, as users are invited to contribute to them and to download the site(s). Moreover, Wal-Mart’s continued construction of more centers that



are bigger than the last in America and around the world see the debates spill over to the material, concrete space that as a corporation Wal-Mart appropriates and occupies: Wal-Mart is unavoidable, strategically placed as Meccas of financial transactions, economic booms and social interaction in small towns. As “the world’s largest retailer and the second largest employer (behind only the federal government) in the United States...colonizing the world through relentless expansion, open[ing] a new megastore

every two business days and...expand[ing] on average into one new country every year. A truly global company, Wal-Mart has redefined the shopping experience for the American consumer.”<sup>12</sup> It generates jobs, but as Greenwald himself asks, “At what cost?” to the environment, labour relations, international trade relations (China looms large) and manufacture (China looms ever larger). Having a Wal-Mart in one’s town has become an emblem of economic pride for the town’s inhabitants, not unlike a town having its own police force. On the other hand, the empty Wal-Marts that do not receive media coverage



An abandoned Wal-Mart in Iowa (Photo by Buzz Malone)

pose more as economic stains of failure and unemployment, much like Moore’s hometown of Flint, Michigan with its abandoned General Motors factory. It comes as no surprise that Greenwald encourages users to share photos of abandoned Wal-Marts on his website, for what is not registered in the national consciousness is the process(es) by which Wal-Mart comes to or leaves a city/town, or how the city/town supports or fights against the building of a Wal-Mart store such as the city of Inglewood in Los Angeles, where the Coalition for a Better Inglewood continues to raise awareness about and try to change the company’s policies in the wake of their successful campaign against the building of a Wal-Mart store in the city in 2004.<sup>13</sup> Or the amount of off-shore sourcing of jobs that comes with the establishment of more Wal-Mart stores.<sup>14</sup> What emerges is the

narrative of retail shopping that has “redefined the shopping experience for the...consumer.” Perhaps, this essay belongs more to the blog section on Greenwald’s website as I continue writing in this vein without more mention of Greenwald’s actual documentary, but this is, after all, a review of a yet-unseen film. And who knows how it will be seen since *Wal-Mart* as of right now is *not* coming to a theatre near you.

### **Lost in Media Space, Texts and DVD Shelf-Life**

In her August article on Greenwald’s documentary (“His Big Retail Opportunity”) in the *Los Angeles Times*, Elaine Dutka writes that Wal-Mart may even include Greenwald’s *Wal-Mart* on its DVD shelves, a contradiction of terms in the making – or poetic justice? – since Wal-Mart declined to participate in Greenwald’s documentary. The issue of *Wal-Mart*’s possible presence in a Wal-Mart store sheds light on the politics of shelf space that help to overdetermine a film’s audience in DVD format in the sense that a store like Wal-Mart targets a certain income-bracket – and with that the social milieu of the buyer (e.g., city or suburb) – and an age-demographic. Whether or not Wal-Mart will eventually carry *Wal-Mart* becomes a moot point in the face of Wal-Mart’s distribution power, which emerges as both an ally and a challenge to major film studios’ own distribution branches in terms of profits. In this context, the difference between Wal-Mart from “bottom-line” distribution companies whose choices in film products to be distributed are predicated on the lowest common denominator to maximise profits, becomes absolutely nil.<sup>15</sup> In the ensuing years, as studios come to rely more and more heavily on DVD revenues for slumping theatre attendance, it will be worth tracking the development of relations between the studios and Wal-Mart, online retailers such as

Amazon, NetFlix or Peerflix and the production of niche market DVDs, software companies or even festivals as producers<sup>16</sup> and distributors, and Internet programming. As the DVD format is emerging as the site of economic routine and resistance, Greenwald and his team of filmmaker-activists at Brave New Films are showing that there are (self-created) options to be had within the seeming fixity of viewing “options” found on a DVD to get behind the message and find the medium.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the sense of Wal-Mart’s commercial might and ubiquity, and the recent string of cases against the company based on discrimination and labour strategies.

<sup>2</sup> Users can also determine the final title of documentary, as Greenwald is still dissatisfied with *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, itself a contribution by a user, although by publication time, several changes will have likely occurred.

<sup>3</sup> One has only to mention lawsuits involving illegal downloading of music/film files to emphasise the Internet’s role as a threat to conglomerations in various industries, superseding the issue of the artist’s rights and ownership of property.

<sup>4</sup> Users can watch the six Philippine-/American films through 30 September 2005 at <http://www.vconline.org>; a separate program of “Pinoy Visions” consisted of screenings that took place in a parking lot in Chinatown, witness to a growing community of Philippine artists. Just like “Pinoy Visions Online,” “Pinoy Parking Lot Visions” was free to the public.

<sup>5</sup> An online-based journal supported by the Independent Media Institute of which Greenwald is a board member.

<sup>6</sup> The television and billboard advertisements for the iPod *nano* in which the viewer sees nothing but a hand cradling the precious product, thereby emphasizing its convenient and “cute” compactness, elides the complexity of its mechanics and therefore the material aspect of the user’s relation with said product.

<sup>7</sup> The word “refract” will become highly significant as media continue to fissure and fuse through the purchases/selling of one company by another (eBay’s recent purchase of Skype and the possible merger of AOL and MSN come to mind), as the definitions “to alter the course of a wave of energy that passes into something from another medium” and “to alter the appearance of something by viewing or showing it through a different medium” capture best the parasitic workings of media and the narrative(s) of technology that emerges.

<sup>8</sup> Users who visit the official website on Marshall McLuhan will be greeted by the opening page that states, “Enter the medium.” See <http://www.marshallmcluhan.com>

<sup>9</sup> I use, and depart from, the term “diegetic” following Noel Burch’s use in *To the Distant Observer*. For Burch, “diegetic” is the “imaginary space-time constituted through” the process of implementing the ‘codes’ that serve as a catalyst to the spectator’s entrance into and absorption of a film’s specific “imaginary space-time.” Burch distinguishes the diegesis from narrative, but when applied to the Internet and digital media, where the distinction between real time and “imaginary space-time” is increasingly reduced, who is to say that the narrative is extra-diegetic or not?

<sup>10</sup> A variation to this makeshift promotion is Iranian filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s website devoted to documenting and promoting the cinematic activity of his entire family. The site includes film reviews and film retrospectives. Unlike other media, the Internet is not censored in Iran. <http://www.makhmalbaf.com>

<sup>11</sup> As of this writing (late August/early September 2005), the content may have since evolved as Greenwald is in the process of editing the documentary.

<sup>12</sup> These statistics were reported in 2001 from Peled’s documentary, *Store Wars*.

<sup>13</sup> “Inglewood Activists Want Wal-Mart to Change Its Cut-Rate Ways,” <http://www.laane.org>

<sup>14</sup> British musician-activist Billy Bragg explains it best: “I grew up in a company town/And I worked real hard ‘til that company closed down/They gave my job to another man/On half my wages in some foreign land” “NPWA (No Power without Accountability)” from the album *England, Half English*

<sup>15</sup> The Wal-Mart stockholders’ meeting of June 2005, which included performances by pop figures such as Jon Bon Jovi and Jessica Simpson, among others, smacks of Hollywood award shows that makes the difference further blurry.

<sup>16</sup> See the interviews with Edward Yang and Abbas Kiarostami, respectively in “Le cinéma est bien plus que loisir,” and “Nous, les artistes, sommes la minorité,” *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no.601 (May 2005) : 39-41.

### **Internet Sources**

<http://www.bravenewfilms.org>

<http://www.robertgreenwald.org>

<http://walmartmovie.com>

For further Internet sources of Wal-Mart coming to your town (the decision to welcome or combat this is up to you) and its activities around the world, visit:

[http://www.aflcio.org/corporatewatch/walmart/walmart 8.cfm](http://www.aflcio.org/corporatewatch/walmart/walmart%208.cfm)

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/walmart/>

<http://walmartclass.com>

<http://www.wal-martchina.com/english>

<http://www.walmartfoundation.org/wmstore/goodworks/scripts/index.jsp>

<http://walmart.nwanews.com>

[http://walmartstores.com/wmstore/wmstores/Home Page.jsp](http://walmartstores.com/wmstore/wmstores/Home_Page.jsp)

<http://walmartwatch.com>

*Images courtesy of the websites cited above*