

Beware the Shopocalypse

1 Lead in

1 The following are well-known parts of New York. What do you know about them?

Queens Broadway East Village Manhattan Times Square

2 The following are well-known American companies. What do you know about them?

Disney Wal-Mart Starbucks Nike

3 In what ways do major American corporations like Starbucks and Nike affect the lifestyle of people in the USA and abroad?

2 Reading 1

You are going to read a newspaper article about a man who is campaigning against 'corporatism' in New York.

Look at the sentences below and check you understand all the words. Then read the passage and decide which are true and which are false.

- 1 Reverend Billy is a real evangelist preacher.
- 2 Recently, people camped in the street because they wanted to buy sneakers.
- 3 Reverend Billy would like to see a large Wal-Mart store built in Queens.
- 4 Billy thinks that cleaning up Times Square was a good thing.
- 5 There are fewer original plays on the Broadway stage these days.
- 6 Nowadays, in New York's neighbourhoods, people from different backgrounds meet less often.

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Preaching against corporate space-invaders

Gary Younge

Wearing a white suit, Reverend Billy strides through the faithful throng of 350 supporters in the East Village of New York to denounce the inherent evil of a \$5 Starbucks latte.

"We're going to push them back," he says to a chorus of alleluias. "Lord, save us from the Shopocalypse. Can we do it? Someone say, 'Alleluia!' Blessed are those who forgo the Gap, because they will save our city."

Reverend Billy is the head of the Church of Stop Shopping. He is not a real reverend. His real name is Bill Talen and he is an actor who mixes the manner of an evangelist preacher with the message of anti-globalisation. With the help of a very accomplished gospel choir, he delivers his own idiosyncratic sermons against the rampant consumerism in New York City. His aim, he says, is to mobilise people to do something about it. One recent week held mixed fortunes. On Tuesday a "sneaker riot" broke out on the Lower East Side of Manhattan after shoppers camped out for up to 48 hours to buy limited edition Nike Pigeon Dunk skateboarding trainers. Only 150 pairs were manufactured and only 20 were on sale in New York. When some people began pushing in the queue, the police were called.

"That's cultish consumerism right there," says Reverend Billy. "But there is hope."

On Thursday came better news. Efforts by Wal-Mart to penetrate the New York market by opening a 12,260-square-metre store in Queens was shelved after popular opposition forced the developer to bow out. "Alleluia," says Reverend Billy. "The devil will not be coming to Queens."

He began his crusade in the late 1990s, when the then mayor Rudolph Giuliani's transformation of the city was in full swing. "There was a cultural cleansing of the city," says Reverend Billy, referring to the area around Times Square. "They didn't just get rid of sex workers. They got rid of interesting people - poor people; people of colour. They made it safe for Disney."

As an actor he saw the changes most markedly in the theatre. "There used to be 200 original shows on Broadway every year. Now they just turn big-budget movies like the Lion King on stage. Only 12% of New Yorkers go to Broadway shows now. Unless you work there, no one from New York goes to Times Square any more. It's just for tourists." The best theatre on Broadway, he thought at the time, was taking place on the street, where store-front preachers were trying to save the prostitutes, beggars and drug addicts. He decided to adopt their style, but change the substance of their message. What emerged was a spirited spoof of televangelism. Reverend Billy has been known to exorcise Starbucks cash registers, for which he spent three days in a Los Angeles jail during election week.

"What used to make New York great," says Savitra D., Reverend Billy's partner and manager, "was that you were constantly pushed up against people who you would never otherwise interact with, and things would happen." But as public space gives way to corporate-owned space, she says, the chances of those chance happenings become increasingly rare. "There are no real neighbourhoods in most of Manhattan any more."

The Guardian Weekly 11-03-2005, page 17

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3 Reading 2

Read the passage again and explain the phrases below. Discuss them with a partner.

- 1 the Shopocalypse
- 2 a "sneaker riot"
- 3 safe for Disney
- 4 a spirited spoof of televangelism.
- 5 public space gives way to corporate-owned space

4 Vocabulary in context

Find the words below in the passage, then match them to the correct synonym.

- | | | | |
|---|---------------------|----|----------------|
| 1 | throng | | |
| | a. large group | b. | small group |
| 2 | denounce | | |
| | a. criticise/attack | b. | praise/support |
| 3 | accomplished | | |
| | a. lucky at | b. | skilful at |
| 4 | rampant | | |
| | a. under control | b. | out of control |
| 5 | penetrate | | |
| | a. to get inside | b. | to get out of |
| 6 | bow out | | |
| | a. arrive | b. | leave |
| 7 | exorcise | | |
| | a. remove evil from | b. | make evil |

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5 Follow up

Read the opinions, and decide which ones you agree with. Then discuss them with other students.

- 1 I am influenced by corporate advertising – I tend to buy Nike trainers and Starbucks coffee.
- 2 I think that major corporations destroy the heart of neighbourhoods – all the shops look the same.
- 3 I reckon we should campaign against major corporations, and stop them building shops everywhere.

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Teacher's notes - Preaching against corporatism

Lead-in

It is a good idea to find pictures of New York and/or the major corporations mentioned in the text to help introduce the lesson and some of the vocabulary. Put students in pairs to discuss questions 1 to 3. Have a brief class feedback.

Answers

Queens = a borough of New York with a large immigrant population

Broadway = the theatre district in Manhattan

East Village = an area of Manhattan which is historically bohemian and rebellious

Manhattan = actually an island, and the historical centre of New York where most of the famous parts are, (5th Avenue, Central Park, Broadway, etc.)

Times Square = a brightly-lit square at the heart of the city

Disney = major Hollywood film maker – famous for its animated films and wholesome image

Wal-Mart = largest supermarket chain in the USA

Starbucks = chain of coffee shops

Nike = manufacturer of sports clothes and sneakers (trainers)

Reading 1: Read the introduction as a class. Then ask students to read the passage and decide which are true and which are false.

Answers

1. False 2. true 3. false 4. false 5. true 6. true

Reading 2: Ask students to read the passage again and explain the phrases to a partner.

Answers

- 1 a combination of 'shop' and 'apocalypse' – meaning that corporate shops are causing an apocalypse (the end of the world)
- 2 a riot caused by the fact that people are fighting over buying sneakers.
- 3 Cleaned up and made pretty and wholesome – like the Disney version of America. In other words, Times Square is no longer real – it's just pretty for tourists.
- 4 A spoof copies something in a funny way to make it seem silly – here, preaching on TV is being ridiculed.
- 5 space in New York which belonged to ordinary people is now owned and controlled by big business

Vocabulary in context: Ask students to find the words in the passage, then match them to the correct synonym.

Answers: 1a, 2a, 3b, 4b, 5a, 6b, 7a

Follow-up: Ask students to decide what they think about the opinions, then ask them to discuss them in small groups.