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It's (Still) About Time

Star Commodities, Capitalist Retroactivity and (Pre)-Scripted Futures

The article examines analogies in the ways in which the culture industry, (star) commodities and financial products (such as derivatives) are shaping the imaginaries of the future in the present. Against the backdrop of the excitement about 21st of October, which became "Back to the Future-Day" in 2015, and the announcement of the Nike MAG sneaker-launch, I seek to analyse whether and to what extent this projection of futurity on a commodity known from product placement in a blockbuster could be understood as a symptom for a deeper lack of futurity.

The 21st of October was not an ordinary day – at least not in the year 2015. As it seems, the 21st of October has become “Back to the Future Day”, an event which had been celebrated worldwide with public screenings of the blockbuster *Back to the Future II*, gatherings and parties. Both traditional and social media were full of comparisons between the year 2015 drawn by the film and our very 2015. The absence of two items known from the film has been especially noted: the flying hoverboard and the self-lacing Nike sneakers. Without those on their feet, some of the *Back to the Future* fans felt as if the future had not come yet.¹

On the following pages, I would like to jump back and forward in time in order to understand to what extent the excitement about the blockbuster could be a symptom for a deeper lack of futurity. The paper aims to negotiate the ways in which the sneaker as a particular spectacular commodity can be understood as the (not yet completed) realisation programme of a pre-conceived future mediated by the culture industry.

In order to illustrate the retroactive character of capitalist performativity through the analysis of the mise-en-scène of this commodity, the self-lacing sneakers, I will initially take a detour to historico-philosophical approaches from the nineteenth century, the period during which the spread of industrial capitalism from within Europe was to result in a capitalist temporality simultaneously linear and circular. Subsequently, I will attempt to demonstrate how in the twentieth century this model of temporality was to trigger further societal transformations, currently reflected in

¹ To illustrate the level of disappointment related to the lack of the shoe, see the hype about fake tweets announcing the launch of the sneaker on October 21st: <http://www.cnet.com/news/sorry-nikes-new-back-to-the-future-shoes-didnt-leak-on-twitter/> (last accessed 23 October 2015).

The Cancellation of the Future (Berardi 2011). These transformations resulted in the unfolding of the *Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1970) on the one hand, and the implementation of new financial and economic instruments from the 1970s onwards on the other. Like the retro-futurist shoe – advertised as the future in the past, and sold as the future in the present – these self-referential finance instruments make sure that the future retroactively “will have been”.

I. Back to the Future or The Eternal Return of the Same

If one followed the news or social networks over the first few days of the year 2015, then one might have noticed frequent references to said Hollywood blockbuster – a film known by most who grew up in the 1980s. As the film situated “the future” in 2015, this year was now invoked as a comparative foil for assessing the level technological progress had actually reached by 2015, itself in turn considered as “the future” as such.

In *Back to the Future II* – as in the other two parts of the trilogy – Marty McFly, the inconspicuous average hero, fights for the regulated course of past and/or future life events so as to secure his own and his family's existence. At all times, Marty's enemy is a character called Biff Tanner, as well as Tanner's male ancestors and descendants. The scenes depicting their antagonism strongly resemble one another to the point of repetition; furthermore, the films refer to each other by means of flashbacks and establish direct cross-allusions. Even if the occasional presentation of dystopic images of the future in the form of run-down suburbs or the “Las-Vegasisation” of an initially placid small town present somewhat breezy social criticism, more wide-reaching questions concerning society or history play no essential role beyond McFly's individual concerns. History and the future form a colourful backdrop to two men's continual duelling for a woman (Marty's mother), determining the fate of all the (exclusively male) descendants. There is no sense of any social utopia being constructed within the film; the possibility of a completely different history or future is – unusual for the genre of science fiction – excluded, paradoxically through the focus on the history of the individual and family.

The film illustrates spectacularly the concept of the infinite return of the same.² In European modernity, this concept is usually traced to Friedrich Nietzsche, as it occurs repeatedly in his work. It is first invoked in *The Gay Science* from 1882: “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence [...]”

2 This concept can now be bought – like most other concepts – in the form of a commodity as a Nietzsche-watch on Amazon: https://www.amazon.de/Armbanduhr-NIETZSCHE-Ewige-Wiederkehr-Gleichen/dp/B001EINB6M/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1445441375&sr=8-2&keywords=nietzsche+uhr (last accessed August 15th 2015).

(Nietzsche 1974, 273). “The infinite return of the same” contradicts both the enlightened bourgeois and the historical-materialist conception of progress; Nietzsche will take it up again at a later point in relation to scientific developments during his period.

In the Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin remarks that the French anarchist Louis-Auguste Blanqui had already put into writing in his book *L'Éternité par les astres* a nearly identical thought a good decade prior to Nietzsche – composed in prison shortly after the bloodshed of the suppression of the Paris Commune: “What I write at this moment in a cell of the Fort du Taureau I have written and shall write throughout all eternity – at a table, with a pen, clothed as I am now, in circumstances like these” (quoted from Benjamin 1999, 112). Furthermore, he declares that there is neither escape from fatalism nor progress; the very universe itself is stagnant. Blanqui reasons that nature consists of a limited number of simple components limiting the possible combinations; this leaves only endless repetition. It is striking that Blanqui makes use of a theatrical vocabulary – as typical for historico-philosophical writings from the nineteenth century, he refers to the ever-same drama, the ever-same set, the ever-same scenes.

In a letter to Horkheimer, Benjamin calls Blanqui’s worldview infernal. He considers it the unconditional surrender to bourgeois society, a society which Blanqui was forced to accept as having won over his life as he approached its end (cf. Benjamin 1999, 112). Similarly to Nietzsche, Blanqui bases his interpretation of history on topical scientific hypotheses; he declares both his personal experience of loss and imprisonment and a concrete historical event as cosmically conditioned and hence eternally valid and unchangeable. Individual imprisonment is turned into cosmic imprisonment; furthermore, the historically concrete loss of the commune supporters becomes a necessary one. Henceforth there could only be banal re-occurrences and repetitions. This not only implies that found circumstances are given rather than open to choice, but also that humanity has no possible agency in making its own history.

II. Nostalgic Futures

We encounter, then, both in this nineteenth-century concept and in the *Back to the Future* trilogy from the 1980s and early 1990s the motif of a cultural and social incapacity to produce the new. This is an incapacity which Fredric Jameson has explicated, roughly contemporaneously with the films, in his well-known analysis of postmodernity as the cultural logic of late capitalism, referring to retro and pastiche phenomena (cf. Jameson 1991). The *Nike MAG* self-lacing sneaker combines the desire for a future with nostalgia, not least since a great part of the target consumer audience would have seen the film as children.

This product invokes nostalgic desires among the well-educated and yet precarious generation of those born in the 1980s who wear more sneakers than any previous generation. Wearing athletic shoes suggests neoliberal values such as fitness, speed and flexibility, but instead experienced, within the changed socio-economic

conditions since the 1980s, as 'free and cool'. Yet, what Walter Benjamin once noted in relation to the flâneur is equally valid for the person wearing this kind of shoe: "Moreover, he is no buyer. He is merchandise" (Benjamin 1999, 42).

It is due to this context that we can currently see the theoretical re-emergence of the critical analysis of cultural exhaustion in terms of an engagement with questions of the reproduction of social relations. Cultural theorist Mark Fisher, referring to Jameson, understands the flow of time under capitalism as simultaneously linear and circular, producing only repetition without being able to create anything fundamentally new. According to Fisher, it is impossible for a future deserving its name either to take place or to become thinkable while caught in such a time loop (cf. Fisher 2009, 2014). Certainly this does not mean that there are no forms of the new whatsoever. It is impossible to deny the both positive and negative societal effects of the marked developments in the information technologies in particular.

III. "Neuerung" (creation of the new) vs. "Erneuerung" (renewing)

What is at stake in the above-mentioned analyses is the lack even of the thinkability of social alternatives beyond the status quo. To keep this in sight, it makes sense to take up Brecht's differentiation between – in German – "Neuerung" and "Erneuerung", translatable perhaps as "creation of the new" and "renewing". Brecht, thinking about the possibilities of the radio as a communication apparatus, decidedly spoke for *Neuerung*, for a creation of the new, but against *Erneuerung*, renewing (cf. Brecht 1997, 557). By contrast, we encounter in *capitalist realism* only a permanent renewing and continuation of technology (of that which is given); the new is not only missing but seems nearly unthinkable.

In a text also concerned, among others, with Benjamin's engagement with Blanqui's cosmological speculation and with Fisher's diagnosis of the postmodern present, Benjamin Noys reminds us of the fact that a Marxist understanding of time is based on interpreting the human relation to capitalism as a relation to time. Referring to Marx's famous dictum from the so-called *Grundrisse* according to which all economy would dissolve into an economy of time, Noys concludes, like many before him, that class struggle is a struggle for time (cf. Noys 2014). A struggle for time in the sense that it is necessary to win back time from capitalism, which reduces all time to the production of values and violently dispossesses people from their time. In summary: it is time that is at stake.

IV. It's about Time

Indeed, that time is at stake unites both capitalism and its critics. This is illustrated, fittingly, by the invite to the presentation of the prototype for the Nike MAG shoe:

under capitalism is not a question of the wage but concerns the relation of wage labour as such.) “Isn’t this the real reason why we keep buying our Nikes although we are fully cognizant of the unbearable exploitation of humans in their production? Nike as a ‘golden calf’ is the emblem of commodity fetishism that sustains in a sensuous way our alienated understanding of our inter-subjective relation to others [...]” (Bahtsetzis 2012, 142-143), posits art historian Sotirios Bahtsetzis, granting an intensified fetish character to artworks (albeit in a context separate from the example at stake here). Such a second-degree fetish character might be ascribed to the fact that artworks are often perceived not as products of human labour but as “an *acheiropoieton* – not handmade – and thus theologised” (ibid., 143). Something similar seems to be valid for the shoe having sprung either from within the film or from the future. Both apparent origins are difficult to relate to the factories in Bangladesh and elsewhere, where the conditions of production resemble those of the nineteenth century.

V. “Beautiful Items” in the Age of “Ethical” Capitalism

The announcement that said shoe would actually reach the markets in 2015 was already met with great excitement both in the “social” and the traditional media in 2011 – in spite of the fact that the then-presented first prototype did not even feature “power laces”. Michael J. Fox emerged in a double-fashion as the shoe’s ideal promoter: both as the actor that had played Marty McFly and as Parkinson patient, the Nike campaign emphasised how useful self-tying shoes would be for people with physical disabilities; hence it was possible to create value even from the actor’s illness.⁴ At the time, 1500 pairs of shoes were auctioned on eBay in a charity action displaying “ethical capitalism” to benefit Fox’ Parkinson aid organisation, reaching an income of 6 million dollars. According to a so-called “sneaker-culture” blog, the buyers had acquired not shoes but “a piece of history.”⁵

VI. A Piece of History

Hence the fetishism of this commodity goes far beyond the ordinary commodity fetishism under capitalism. As the same blog puts it: “There are sneaker releases, and then there was the Nike MAG launch in 2011.” Under conditions of an artificially created scarcity, it became possible in this auction to purchase a piece of history. It is a formulation that is not coincidentally reminiscent of the way segments from the

4 For a depiction I would like to point out to a short clip showing how Michael J. Fox presented the shoe at David Letterman’s talkshow in 2011: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5DhOeEMxol> (last accessed 23 October 2015).

5 In fact this phrase is often repeated in reference to the shoe: e.g. <https://www.sneakerfreaker.com/2016/10/18/special-message-nike/> (last accessed 27 October 2016).

Berlin Wall were commodified soon after its fall as symbols of freedom and of the apparently inextricably related so-called free-market economy.⁶

But in the case of the *Nike MAG*, its mise-en-scène as a piece of history seems not all – for what is being evoked is the flashing materialisation of a pre-programmed future. The spectacular commodity makes visible how capitalism realises an image of the future it had itself promised in the past, by means of a retroactive performativity. It will have been: in 2015, people will actually wear the shoes which Nike had designed in 1989 for people to wear in the film's 2015. This is, then, certainly not "the future", but the fulfilment of a staged prophecy, an extremely successful case of *product placement* – mediated and constructed by the culture industry, which, as Horkheimer and Adorno had already noted in the 1940s, has a tendency to make itself "the irrefutable prophet of the existing order" (Horkheimer/Adorno 2008, 156).⁷

VII. Future-eating Futures

Representing the temporality of capital – a temporality at once addicted to innovation and pseudo-cyclical –, Nike trails behind its own aged image of the future, like the (progressive) beginning stage of Berardi's "slow cancellation of the future" (cf. Berardi 2011, 13). Released between 1985–1990, the *Back to the Future* trilogy emerged at a stage in which so-called "futures contracts", colloquially "futures", were introduced to the markets as a reaction to the financial and economic problems of the 1970s. Futures are a new form of derivatives adding new temporal dimensions to the relation between money, time, and abstraction. According to Alfred Sohn-Rethel the relation manifests itself in the real abstraction embodied by the coin; it is only the coin's being passed on from hand to hand that renders possible a linear conception of time – yet, a linear conception which itself becomes incessantly repetitive as a result of the circulation of money (cf. Sohn-Rethel 1989). As a credo, money is always "a bundle of time" (Lyotard 2004, 224); in contrast to Marty McFly, it does not require a re-functioned DeLorean in order to travel through time. And more than for all other forms of money, this is the case for the so-called futures. Elena Esposito notes:

As traditional money is based on the homogenization of goods to bind the future, so derivatives, realizing the dizzying performance of the creation of the future, achieve a second level of homogenization to bind time in a new way. They can thus be considered a new form of money [...]. Derivatives are a highly self-referential form of money in the sense that they do not refer to anything external [...]. Its value is created [...] in reference to the future. In Rotman's terms, a derivative is a form of money (Xenomoney) that creates its reference by itself, 'a sign that creates itself out of the

6 The link is not arbitrary not least since *Back to the Future II* (as mentioned above) was released in 1989, the film's title invoked in the context of post-communism. Cf. Buden 2009, 172-183.

7 „Kulturindustrie hat die Tendenz, sich zum Inbegriff von Protokollsätzen zu machen und eben da durch zum unwiderlegbaren Propheten des Bestehenden.“

future' [...]. The value is generated in the present calculation of future performances which in turns become part of the present. (Esposito 2012, 27-28)

Furthermore, Joseph Vogl notes – in passing but accurately – that futures mark a meeting point of historico-philosophical substrates and finance mathematics, concerning also questions of the performative and of media technologies. For if the efficiency the market is credited with is etymologically understood as a friction-less and self-referential universe (from Latin, “*efficere*”, to effect, bring about, produce), then it becomes visible as the realisation of prophetic powers. In this sense, it is hardly surprising that the implementation of the Noble-Prize winning “Black-Scholes Formula” required for the current form of futures trading constitutes an “enacted theory” assimilating reality to economic theory. Vogl considers this a reality imitating theory, a process which shows the performative quality of calculation: finance derivatives produce the condition of their own possibility, appealing to a market that can only retrospectively verify their economic rationality. In this sense, it is not surprising that finance-economic thinking is prone to succumbing to the temptation of thinking the end of history (cf. Vogl 2013, 69-77).

The parallels of this process with our star commodity are eye-catching: in the case of derivatives, too, capitalism seems to create its own facticity, realising itself retroactively. What seems to be at stake is the domination of time by means of speculation with temporal forces themselves in turn producing timelessness, creating value from the future and ultimately abolishing it. This is, again, a realisation programme – even if, as the numerous crises show, rarely without disruption. It is a programming of reality that is simultaneously concerned with the production of timelessness and the domination of time, attempting to finance by means of speculation and hedging a post-historical period. It's still about time. But the seeming realisation of the future in both cases tells us not only about the production of time within a capitalist economy but also about how impossible precisely that economy makes imagining an actual future.

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