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## Know it while you have it: The ontological condition of a cancelled advertisement

In 2011, Levi's intoned the words of Bukowski's poem 'The Laughing Heart' in its Weiden + Kennedy produced advertisement entitled 'Legacy – Now is our Time', as part of their global 'Go Forth' campaign.<sup>1</sup> A creative director declared the guiding spirit behind the campaign:

It's time to inspire and activate a young, progressive culture to make a difference, to be heard, to have a voice [...] and time to not only bring them a message that matters but allow them to participate in a process of re-imagining.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly the advertisement includes a recital of Bukowski's poem (Bukowski is posthumously credited as the 'Writer' of the advertisement<sup>3</sup>) as the background soundtrack that accompanies images of youthful rebellion and non-conformity. We observe skinny youths in tight jeans and underwear as they engage in sexual abandonment, have transcendent experiences in nature, unrestrainedly dance at a rock concert, play with fire, and, as though it were a seamless and logical continuation within this sequence of imagery, we see them in the streets of Berlin, marching behind a red flag, unflinchingly facing down heavy armoured riot police and beckoning the primed cops to do their worst. 'Go forth,' the advertisement proclaims.

This act of appropriation need hardly surprise us. In the dialectical relationship between consumer culture and symbolic subversion, value is often identified for corporate

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<sup>1</sup> *Levi's Legacy*®, 2011 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xn1V9v-v5us&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xn1V9v-v5us&feature=youtube_gdata_player)> [accessed 20 April 2015]. Charles Bukowski, *Betting on the Muse: Poems & Stories* (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1996), p. 400.

<sup>2</sup> *Razorfish Case Study on Levi's Go Forth Campaign* <<https://vimeo.com/16602435>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

<sup>3</sup> 'Levi's Go Forth with Legacy', *The Inspiration Room* <<http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2011/levis-go-forth-with-legacy/>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

extraction. Consumer culture, therefore, may be thought of as a cat and mouse game as advertisers seek to encode discourses of truth, subjectivity, freedom and authenticity, whilst the discourses themselves struggle to exist outside of consumerism so as to maintain relevance and affect. These moments of direct betrayal, however, are not what interest us here. What does is what happened next, which we believe to be a historically situated and saturated moment. As a writer for Forbes magazine then put it, 'as London burns and violence creeps north into Manchester and Birmingham, Levis launch of an advertising campaign that features images of rebellious youth clashing with police in riot gear comes at a bad time.'<sup>4</sup> The British television advertising campaign was cancelled because its launch date, October 2011, coincided with a national contagion of urban rioting, and suddenly the depictions in the advert could have been construed as a reckless incitement.

### **The Ontological Condition of the Image**

You might react to the appropriation of Bukowski's poem and imagery of leftist protest for the purpose of a lifestyle advertisement with a kind of disbelieving outrage. We think there is something much deeper going on here and wish to contrast this hermeneutical suspicion with an ontological depth. It is all *too easy*, we suggest (though not at all an error) to see only an appropriation of image for the sake of exchange value. We want to argue that this appropriation has its own ontological condition, and this makes the image far more complex than merely a cynical advertising campaign in which the makers of the advert have, yet again, stolen and debased counter-culture to sell their wares. We read the advertisement in terms of its ontological condition and suggest that the image was withdrawn in more complex circumstances than conventionally understood; more complex than the

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<sup>4</sup> 'Levi's Latest "Go Forth" Ad Romanticizes Youth Riots At The Wrong Time', *Forbes* <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/matthewnewton/2011/08/10/levis-latest-go-forth-ad-romanticizes-youth-riots-at-the-wrong-time/>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

embarrassment of being seen to valorise rioting during actual riots, and the sudden exposure of their vacuous nihilism.

This article, then, develops an ontological interpretation of corporate appropriation of counter-culture that draws upon Benjamin's theory of the phantasmagoria and reflects upon the meaning of practices in the age of human capital. We bring the attendant insights to bear in a re-reading of Freud's essay on the uncanny, this time emphasising the essay's temporal doubles which help us to understand the advertisement's liminality as a deliberate rendering of our post-consumerist future, intending to steal from us a future where, as Bukowski put it, 'the gods wait to delight'. In this moment of rendering and foreclosure, we argue that a more radical understanding of the ontological depth of advertising's imagery is possible. As stated, it is too easy to interpret the Levis advert as a sell-out of Bukowski's poem and the advert as a vacuous and cynical plaudit of revolution. What is more difficult is to experience Levis advertisement as *messianic* in the way Benjamin intends. We do not wish to say that the makers of this advert (still less those who commissioned it) intended it subversively to be messianic (otherwise it would be difficult to comprehend why they would have cancelled it), rather we want to interpret and reawaken these lost possibilities that are the condition for the power and affect of the image itself, and which the advertisers sought to hijack before history caught up with them. Because history did catch up and overtake the advertisement, a different analysis is possible.

### **Benjamin's Phantasmagoria and the Messianic Promise.**

The ontological depth of the image is at the heart of Benjamin's *Arcade Project*.<sup>5</sup> He realised

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999).

that what many took to be merely trivial aspects of daily existence (shopping, fashion and advertising) are at the heart of capitalism. What was true in Benjamin's time has now become obvious for all. Who today does not know that these once thought of peripheral sectors of the economy are at the heart of accumulation? It is not in material production that we see the greatest degree of surplus value, but in immaterial production. Capital is increasingly virtual. Not just in financialisation, but also in consumption. It is the conjunction of signs and desire where the greatest profit is produced, not in the need for material things. Everything has become ephemeral and evanescent. All is signs and surface.

However, it would be a profound misunderstanding of Benjamin's project to think it is puritanical and negative, as though in pointing out the vacuousness at the heart of modernity, one might return to an age when everything was solid and permanent. At the heart of the phantasmagoria, as Benjamin calls it, however weak and obscure, there are visible still burning embers of utopian possibilities of a different history that did not happen. The materialist historian blows on these cinders of a lost permanent past so that they throw a faint light onto another future within the contradictions and tensions of our present where we are told there is no alternative.

As previously stated, our desire is to interpret the text as messianic, that is to avoid rehearsing the well told narrative of how capitalism recuperates its dissent (as argued in, for example, Boltanski and Chiapello's *New Spirit of Capitalism*<sup>6</sup>). Instead we want to interpret and then reawaken these lost possibilities that are the condition for the power and affect of the image itself. We want to do this because the dialectical image, Benjamin argues,

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<sup>6</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London; New York: Verso, 2005).

contains within itself the repressed collective imagination in a crystalline form, and this is what we wish to access. We want to read the advert as a dialectical image that contains a yearning for another future; albeit a future that in the very moment of its consumption, is rendered impossible. This is why interpreting the image is the same as interpreting the dream. What is asleep in the image has to be awakened by the dialectical materialist. What is repressed can be brought to light and the depths made visible.

All advertising that is jacked onto the unconscious collective imagination is messianic in this sense. From the side of the production of the image, and for the sophisticated and hermeneutical consumer, this only appears as a contemptible theft, but the dialectical materialist knows that without the messianic, the image would not exist at all. The advertisement feeds from the very energy and power of imagination it needs to repress, in order to create excessive surplus value. This ontological condition of the advert is made invisible in the very production of the image, and this is, we will explain, because of the peculiar historical moment of the context of its production.

### **Advertising and Branding**

The figure of advertising within capitalism remains enigmatic. At its most basic, advertising informs and persuades consumers, but it is obvious that it does much more besides.

Advertising also bellows desire and dislodges consumers from rational decision-making and summons them towards consuming within an ethic of imagination and fantasy. Along the way, advertising encodes and disseminates ideologies relating to gender, class, racial, and consumerist subjectivity. Hence car advertisements allure and coax prospective consumers via enchanting representations of lifestyle and sexuality, rather than linger over detailed technical specification. More recently, advertising tends to be located within a wider nexus

in which the brand is emphasised as the central component that subjectifies the consumer into a constellation of affect. To buy an Apple device, for example, is to purchase into a regime of meaning and practice that extends much further than consuming a mere gadget. It reaches into the self and into social relations. It is the power of the brand that allows us to understand the movement of Apple well beyond consumers using personal computers, into a whole way of life populated by a seemingly unlimited range of Apple products, services, and applications. The brand is not only consumed. The brand shapes and determines the consumer, both actively, in that the consumer sees themselves in the brand, and also passively, in that services, which is what most of the successful brands have become, increasingly collect masses of data on consumers so that they cannot only predict, but also cause future behaviour. In the brand, the individual is the commodity. The use value of the product is reset by advertising within a wider network of lifestyle related practices, and the subject-object distinction between consumers and the items being consumed dissolves.<sup>7</sup>

Carl Sagan once famously said, 'if you wish to bake an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe'<sup>8</sup>, and this can now be reformulated as: 'if you wish to sell a pie, you must first invent the person as a consumer and animate the world they inhabit.'

To say that advertising is conservative, in that it deepens consumption, is true, but to do that it has to populate and parasitise the subversive and insurrectionary. It scans the horizon of popular culture, looking for the new forms of value that can be ushered into being and be exploited. At one level this gives rise to the profession of 'coolhunting': advertisers who seek

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<sup>7</sup> Detlev Zwick and Julien Cayla, *Inside Marketing: Practices, Ideologies, Devices* (Oxford [England]; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> For the Sagan quote, see *Carl Sagan Crumbly But Good*, 2011  
 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ssV79Qi7mM&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ssV79Qi7mM&feature=youtube_gdata_player)> [accessed 21 April 2015].

out the latest indie music or set of imagery not yet tainted by commercial appropriation. At a deeper level, advertisers become readers of ideology, scanning not just the cultural, but also the political landscape for underlying anxieties within the national consciousness. As Douglas Holt put it in his influential book *How Brands Become Icons*, 'iconic brands provide extraordinary identity value because they address the collective anxieties and desires of a nation'<sup>9</sup>, hence brands are understood to contain mythical qualities, equivalent to the cultural resonance once enjoyed by Horatio Alger novels or John Wayne westerns. Holt gives the example of Budweiser's campaigns during the 1980s that followed Reagan's failed promises to reinvigorate American masculinity in the spirit of frontier mythologies. Reagan only presided over further emasculation by rendering a large range of traditionally masculine professions in manufacturing obsolete. Responsively, Budweiser developed a campaign that included imagery of blue jeans, baseballs, young men in military uniforms, car mechanics sparring, attractive women with blonde hair, running Clydesdales and this 'targeted this acute tension between the revived American ideals of manhood and the economic realities that made these ideals nearly unattainable for many men'.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, in Holt's analysis of what he terms 'cultural branding', the brands are not merely parasitic but also directly productive of the social fabric, making interventions into ongoing political impasses and, if all goes well, therapeutically redressing ideological anomalies. In this regard, we might consider brands as active agents for the status quo. Hence for Levis' Legacy advert, which literally depicts youth playing with fire, the sudden overtaking by history transposed the advertisement from being an agent of containment to becoming dangerously close to an agent of aggravation, reminding us of the fine line that advertisers

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas B Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Holt, pp. 6–7.



ride. It is tempting to even feel sorry for the advertisers as they became trapped into a double-bind: they too resonantly tapped into the zeitgeist, it was all too perfectly timed and consequentially they over-identified with the disaffection.<sup>11</sup> The simultaneous eruption of actually rioting in North London brought about a collision of the real and the symbolic that caused Holt's cultural branding model to short-circuit and left Levis with an expensive problem. Just like the characters depicted in the advert, Levis had been playing with fire.

Therefore any reading that reduces advertising content to the strictly reactionary only ever sees one side of the image. At the very moment it betrays the future, it leaves a trace of a utopia in the repetition of an imaginary past that did not happen. All images of this kind induce us to dream of a classless society without exploitation. If the dialectical image were only cynical, as the clever hermeneutist believes, then it would not work. If the Levis advert or the Apple brand did not contain the dream or wish fulfilment of an alternative future asleep in the present, then they would not have the affective force or attraction they do. It is a profound misunderstanding of the power of the dialectical image only to interpret it negatively. They are ciphers of subjective desire and in this way contain, in a concentrated way, figures of another life.

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth mentioning that the British campaign had a corresponding formula in the US. Instead of using Bukowski, Walt Whitman was preferred as he poetically summoned youth to insurrection (see, *Levi's - OPioneers! (Go Forth) Commercial*, 2009 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG8tqEUTlvs&feature=youtube\\_gdata\\_player](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG8tqEUTlvs&feature=youtube_gdata_player)> [accessed 21 April 2015]). Interestingly, the campaign sought to valorise the experience of the declining American blue collar labour movement and lead with the slogan 'We are all workers' (see, 'Adeevue - Levi's: We Are All Workers, There Is Work to Be Done and Undone, Horse, Everybody's Work Is Equally Important' <<http://www.adeevue.com/2010/01/levis-we-are-all-workers-there-is-work-to-be-done-and-undone-horse-everybodys-work-is-equally-important-outdoor/>> [accessed 21 April 2015].) and did so contemporaneously to the Occupy Wall Street movement's slogan "We are the 99%". The coincidence was also present in their slogan "Everybody's work is equally important" (see, Duncan Macleod, 'Levis Ready to Work', *The Inspiration Room* <<http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2011/levis-ready-to-work/>> [accessed 21 April 2015]). It is noteworthy that, as part of the campaign, a series of short documentaries depicting the hardship of post-industrial Braddock were produced (see, *Levi's We Are All Workers - Ep. 1* <<https://vimeo.com/19226450>> [accessed 21 April 2015].) Of course, the irony of Levis contrived identification with the inhabitants of a depressed post-industrial town is apparent when it is remembered that Levis outsource their production.

## Capitalism and Subjectivity

Marx famously describes capitalism in the *Communist Manifesto* as the destruction of every social order that has ever existed.<sup>12</sup> Nothing can stand in its way or remain the same. Just as capitalism can wreck the external world, so too can it maim the relation of the self to itself. It is as though having reached the limits of geographical space, first through colonisation, and then globalisation, it now turns inwards. The fundamental concept to understand this change in direction, as Foucault recognised in his lecture on biopolitics, is human capital.<sup>13</sup> For classical economics (including Marx), human capital would be an oxymoron. Capital produces wealth by exploiting the capacities of human beings. Human beings and capital are fundamentally opposed to one another and politics is nothing less than the expression of this opposition. On the one hand, capital, on the other, labour. For this new economics, which comes under the label 'neo-liberalism', but has its source in Ordoliberalism and the Chicago school, the opposite is the case. Human capital is a tautology. Rather than human beings and capital being opposed to one another, they are to be viewed as the same. This means that relations that were seen as being outside of capital, like the family, education and health, could now be viewed as internal to capital. Human capital is a heterogeneous as opposed to a homogeneous concept of capital. Capital contains what is other to itself. All aspects of life are to be found within the flows of capital and there is nothing that cannot, or should not, be capitalised.

The subjective correlate of this objective financialisation of life, and indeed of everything, is

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<sup>12</sup> 'All that is solid melts into the air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.' Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist manifesto* (London; New York: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 223.

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics : Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*, trans. by Michel Senellart (Basingstoke [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 216–38.

that the individual increasingly sees themselves in the image of capital. To reach one's potential as a human being means to invest in oneself as capital. We are all to become entrepreneurs of the self. We are not to feel ourselves opposed to capital, but as part of the very process of its accumulation. This is a fundamental and decisive historical shift. Whereas classical economists would have explained work as *objective* exploitation of the worker (whether negatively or positively), economists like Schultz, Becker and Mincer, describe salaried work as *subjective* fulfilment.<sup>14</sup> The object of economic analysis becomes, then, not the impersonal and anonymous processes that somehow trap and alienate individuals despite themselves, but an *essentialised* understanding of human behaviour. There is not, on the one side, the worker with their labour power, and on the other, the capitalist exploiting that labour power, but the individual who acts itself as a capitalist, and relates to itself as an investment (through education, health, and other kinds of self-development).

We are all capitalists now. Capital does not stand outside of us like an external force, pushing us around like chess pieces on a board. Capital is your own activity as an entrepreneur of the self. Improve yourself so you can earn more. See yourself as a potential investment and your salary as promised future actual revenue. The cost of higher education, for example, is fees and loss of income, but I hope to offset this cost against the promise of a higher salary in the future.<sup>15</sup> How is this different, in terms of its mechanism, from any other investment in capital? If you do not invest in yourself in this way, then you are lost.

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<sup>14</sup> See, Theodore W Schultz, *Investment in Human Capital : The Role of Education and of Research* (New York: Free Press, 1970). Gary S Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education*, 2d ed (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research : distributed by Columbia University Press, 1975). Jacob Mincer, *Schooling, Experience, and Earnings*. (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research; distributed by Columbia University Press, 1974).

<sup>15</sup> This was the justification of the introduction of tuition fees in the UK and their tripling in England in 2010. See, 'The Browne Report: Higher Education Funding and Student Finance - Publications - GOV.UK' <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-browne-report-higher-education-funding-and-student-finance>> [accessed 22 April 2015].

You are outside the revenue-flux of capital and are destined to a life of precarious and disposable employment.

If there is no outside to capital, if every human being is only a revenue-flux, then what consequence does this have for politics? As Tronti already pointed out in 1966, in *Workers and Capital*, the aim of capital is to unify the interests of the worker with itself.<sup>16</sup> If they see themselves in the image of capital, then the great political struggles of modernity will come to an end. It is not the collapse of the Soviet Union, and all that this event contained, that lead to the triumph of capitalism. This is to confuse a symptom with its cause. It is because the workers increasingly saw themselves as entrepreneurs rewarded by differential salaries that sounded the death knell to the traditional left. The worker did not fear exploitation; they wanted to be exploited, or rather they wanted to become the objects of their own self-exploitation, because not to be exploited by capital was not to be able to plug oneself into the revenue-flux, but instead to be left on the scrap heap of life.

Before we succumb to a counsel of despair, it is important to emphasise that this appropriation of the worker by capital is always ideological. What capital promises is not what is true, even though its untruth structures social reality. It is not enough that an ideology simply lies, or no one would believe it, and to accuse everyone of a universal stupidity except oneself is an egotistical weakness every critic should avoid. Ideology must produce a reality. Ideology is not a representation of an existing state of affairs where one can point out the difference between one and the other; a 'bad' in opposition to a 'good' representation. Ideologies sustain and create realities. Without them, reality would not exist

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<sup>16</sup> Mario Tronti, *Operai E Capitale*. (Torino: Einaudi, 1966).

as such. The anomalies lie not between ideology and reality, but internally within the ideology, in the gaps and inconsistencies of its own narrative. This is why ideologies collapse when they no longer make sense, not because they cease to agree with a supra-reality that exists outside of them. Otherwise it would be impossible to explain why people continue to believe even when the facts (reality) so manifestly tell them otherwise (that for example student debt leads to fulfilling and well-paid work). Ideologies work because they structure reality so that the anomalies are not experienced as anomalies. They are either ignored or said to be problems we can solve in the future. It is the task of the dialectical materialist to focus on these anomalies so as to demonstrate that there are inconsistencies within an ideology that mask its own incompleteness.

The high water mark of ideological mystification is when an ideology presents itself as non-ideological, as though there were no difference between reality and discourse, and history itself were but a fiction. These two moments always arrive together. An ideology claims that it is the only true account of reality (in this way it believes itself to be a science), and that all other ideologies are therefore false. Because it claims to be the only true representation of reality, it also claims that all history (the history of false ideologies) has come to an end. The watchword of an ideology is always 'there is no alternative'. The critique of ideology is not a falling back into relativism (everything is ideology), which is merely the opposite side of the coin of an absolute claim to truth (it is only because we do not believe in absolute truth anymore that we become relativists, such that Nietzsche can claim that nihilism is the last form of Christianity). The critique of ideology is, on the contrary, the commitment to historical reality (the reality of change and becoming), which always produces anomalies within any ideological structure, and which it covers over through its own deviations,

inconsistencies and incoherence.

## **Ideology and Practice**

Reality everywhere and always overflows any ideology, but it always does so in a specific historical form. The idea of a transcendent ahistorical, objective reality is itself ideological. Reality is dated. Rather than thinking that the meaning of reality is obvious, the opposite is the case. Meaning is rare, and there are always other possibilities. Nothing has to be as it is, though it always appears as it is. What history shows us, is how reality as conceived at any given time could have been different, and is certainly different from the way we conceive it at the time. The point is to make sense of that change, however rare and exceptional it is. We think, or at least those of us with a philosophical bent do, that first of all people have an idea and then they change reality to fit those ideas. So for example, someone has the idea of being a prince (perhaps they have read *Machiavelli*) and then they decide to govern that way. People then study these ideas in universities and imagine this is how history itself changes. It is not ideas that are first but practices, and the latter are not simply disguised ideas, which conceal a hidden essence.

A practice is a subjective human activity pure and simple. If a practice is a human activity, then it is first of all a verb rather than a noun. If power is a relation between the governed and the governors, then what determines these objects are the practices of governing. History is the history of activities, of verbs, and only subsequently of objects, nouns. We like nouns because they are stable and do not change. A rock is a rock, is it not? Nature never changes, but practices change all the time.<sup>17</sup> Is there any limit to human practices? Is not

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<sup>17</sup> This opposition between nature and history is a false one. What is real are practices (and this includes the sciences). Natural objects are the result of practices. There is no hidden reality that transcends them and

this what anthropology and history tell us, namely that human beings are infinitely imaginative when it comes to the practice of political power? Why do we imagine such change should come to an end now suddenly and the way we live permanent? It is because practices come first, and history is nothing but the history of practices, that ideologies can never amount to a total explanation. It is not objectifications like Justice or the State or the Market that explain a practice; rather it is a particular historically dated practice that explains these objectifications. Any such practice is never completely reducible to a visible form, which explains why knowledge and power are never one and the same, even though knowledge is always attracted to power, and attempts to capture and stratify it.

It is therefore a profound misunderstanding of Marx to think that he too is giving a trans-historical explanation of history. This is to confuse Marx with Marxism, the latter being a variant of Hegelianism.<sup>18</sup> Marx begins with practices. This is his critique of ideology. To criticise ideology is not, as Althusser believed, to discover some truth or structure that is concealed by the ideology and which can be described scientifically. On the contrary, it is to make the ontological claim that what is real are practices and any objectification is subsequent to these. It is not the job of the dialectical historian to offer yet one more objectification as an explanation of history (Class, Production, Workers, Capital, and so on), but to describe these practices, which are the result of what people say and do. History consists of heterogeneous practices, rare and unexpected, and not of homogeneous forces mysteriously determining practices from the outside. There is not first of all the State or Power, which then take on multiple versions throughout history (as though a hidden

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remains the same outside of history.

<sup>18</sup> For a sustained critique of the Marxist appropriation of Marx and the centrality of praxis in his thought, see, Michel Henry, *Marx* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). Only the first volume has been translated as, Michel Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

essence had fallen into time). Rather there are only multiple versions of the state or power, which are objectifications of different practices, each one different from the other. The multiple precedes any unity and creates it as an ideological mystification of its own singularity. Each practice views history from its own standpoint and comes to believe that all history begins and ends with it. It does not see the emptiness surrounding its exceptionality, that reality could have been otherwise, and that there are others ways of doing and speaking. Any such universality comes *after* a practice rather than preceding it.

This is why Benjamin speaks of the history of the 'now point', or the 'dialectics of the standstill', because he worries that the dialectical materialists have fallen prey to the same abstractions as their enemies, who also view history through the veil of progress towards some ultimate end, where all contradiction and difference would vanish.<sup>19</sup> The historical perception sees the past moment reaching a higher level of actualisation than it did in its own reality. This higher actuality is the image: the past repeated, but as though it came from the future. It is the reactivation of the past that puts the present to the test (*apocatastasis*). This is the difference between the dialectical historian and the historiographer. The latter sees history as a straight line. He sees one thing happening after the other, where historical change is the repetition of the same (different forms of the same natural objects), whereas the dialectical historian sees history as a series of heterogeneous practices, in which a different future already announces itself in the failed actualisations (anomalies) of the past. This is why the dialectical historian, like Benjamin, is fascinated by fragments, pieces, images and absurdities, rather than by the grand history of princes and kings, or by relations of production that serenely progress to some ultimate end. The founding concept of dialectical

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<sup>19</sup> Benjamin, p. 261.



history, he writes, 'is not progress but actualisation'.<sup>20</sup> Surrounding every practice, there is a void of the potential. From within any given practice, this void is invisible. To render these possibilities invisible is the function of ideology, which does not determine the practices but follows from them. Within any practice, however, (otherwise there would be no change), there are anomalies, non-actualised potentialities asleep in a dream or an image. This is the origin, however weak and momentary, of their force to affect and unsettle us. Benjamin's thesis is that in our epoch – the era of the commodity, where exchange value has replaced use value, and the individual themselves have become a commodity and the spectacle is as important, if not more so, than the object sold – we might find this future moment torn out of the continuum of history, in the less likely of places: fashion, shopping centres and advertising. And why not, since this is where desire is to be found?

The image of capital has its source in the real capacities and abilities of individuals. It is always and everywhere the partial actualisation of possibilities. It is the ruinous relation of the self to itself, from and to the world. Ruinous, because it reverses the real relation between capital and life by presenting capital as the mysterious origin of life, such that we must destroy life to preserve capital, and not capital to save life, as life would not be possible without it, rather than capital without life. The contradiction at the heart of capital is the total objectification of life in capital, whose limit condition is death, but it requires the subjectivity of life to produce surplus value, for without the intelligence, creativity and passion of individuals it would produce nothing at all. To conceal this contradiction, the ideology of capital has to force the individual to see their subjectivity as nothing but the objectivity of capital. Nonetheless, however smoothly this representation imagines it works,

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, p. 260.

historical reality, which is made up of real practices or real people, exceeds it from all sides.

Critique, critique of ideology, is the counter movement: to show the real hidden in the image, to reveal the hidden mechanism of the image, and to reverse the 'miraculation' of capital that presents itself as the origin of the life it destroys.

If the image did not betray itself, then the ideology of ideology would remain invisible. What the image hides is the impossibility of a future, because of the commodification of the individual, but the affective force of the image is as though that future were real, that people really did live lives of intensity, protest and passion, and not lives of opportunism, cynicism and anxiety, so they can afford to buy Levis. When the image comes into contact with the real, real riots rather than fake ones, then the ideological contradiction becomes too visible. It was right to cancel the advert, not because it would have incited more riots (there is no evidence that the rioters were watching the Levis advert), but because its absurdity would become too obvious.

### **Freud: the Uncanny and the Double**

This is the sensible hermeneutical reading of the situation, and we would not want to dismiss it out of hand. But what if the opposite were true, that the advert presented, despite itself, the real revolutionary moment? This is the paradox of a betrayal. It has to present what it betrays. In this sense, betrayal is a kind of a respect and recognition, even if it is one that is repressed and distorted. This repression requires a deeper ontological analysis than the hermeneutical outrage, and this analysis, as we have already glimpsed with Benjamin, is essentially temporal. Here we want to use Freud's analysis of the uncanny,

though what we will have to say about time will, to some extent, differ from his.<sup>21</sup>

The subversion at the heart of the advert's image is the future. In one sense, this future is banal. The commodity will fulfil a need. This is the simplest form of advertising. Even this mundane image, however, can become more complex. The image does not just signify a use value, but something more nebulous and indistinct, like a lifestyle or authenticity. Now that every house has a washing machine, at least in the more developed economies, the latter form of advertising has replaced the former. The purchase of jeans is no longer the satisfaction of a need (hard wearing durable work clothes), but an expression of one's values and principles. It is in these more allegorical images that we discover another kind of future, however distorted and weak it might be. Of course it would be absurd to say this other future is what the image itself promises, as though the advert were promoting revolution, when entirely the opposite is the case. Its affective force is parasitical rather than assertive. It captures joyful passions to transform them into sad ones. It seizes and co-opts vitality for the sake of consumption. This is obvious in the Levis advert, because it consists of a quotation of the Bukowski poem, which itself could not be more opposed to its own values, but even the aura of this poem only has a resonance in this image, because it is linked to a revolutionary moment (a revolution that never happens and which is arrested in the image itself). Nonetheless the virtual revolution is and has always been. If it were not, then the image would have no power. It would be flat and monotonous and produce no emotion in the viewer. The image shows us what has not happened, and betrays this happening in both form and content, but it only works, because the possibility of happening

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<sup>21</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'", in *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo Da Vinci and Other Works*, ed. by Albert Dickson, trans. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 335–76. Freud does mention in passing advertising in this piece, though only in relation to pillars in the street announcing spiritual mediums. Freud, p. 365.

of what has not happened (the revolution to come, what Benjamin calls the 'wish image' of a 'classless society') comes before every present actuality rather than after it.<sup>22</sup> It is a permanent contestation of the ideology of the present.

We are describing the image from the outside (from the position of the subject who knows), but in terms of the subject who sees this doubling up of the image, it is felt as uncanny and unsettling, because it presents the tension of the moment precisely by not presenting it. This abortive presentation has two sides: on the one hand, it is the presentation of the image itself, where the image attempts to present itself as what it is not, an advert. It professes to be a visual re-interpretation of the Bukowski poem, as though the selling of jeans were an after-thought (whereas in reality, obviously, it is the other way around). The viewer can experience this deceit in two ways. Either they can identify with the image and associate this brand of jeans with an outsider and alternative lifestyle (this was surely the intention of those who made the advert and those who bought it), or the hermeneutical subject can feel that this is just yet one more cynical example of advertising appropriating counter culture in order to sell commodities. There is a third possibility, however, that we are here arguing for, which is more difficult to grasp than even this double presentation of sincerity and cynicism, and that refers to the temporal structure of the image itself. On the one hand, there is the aesthetic or hermeneutical double of the image, its intention and subsequent interpretation, and on the other, the double of time. This does not mean that these 'doubles' have no relation to one another. The affective force of the image's meaning has its source in the temporal repetition, but to remain only at the level of semantics is to be lost in the image's own distortion. The image promises to the degree that it lies. The

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<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, p. 4.

power of the advert has its source in a different historical reality, which it conceals by its aesthetic double. This is why it is not sufficient just to interpret the cynicism in the use of the image. The materialist historian has to show how the image contains, at its centre, a past that can only be redeemed in a future yet to happen.

Freud's essay on the uncanny is full of doubles. This is the joy of reading it. One double tumbles after the other. There are doubles of fathers, of daughters and automatons, eyes and penises, getting lost and finding one's way back in the very place you sought to avoid. Some examples are from literature and fables, others from psychoanalysis and everyday life. Freud tells a wonderful, entertaining story, which you could imagine him retelling at some party or get together, of suddenly finding himself in the prostitute's quarter of a city while walking on an Italian holiday.<sup>23</sup> Wishing, perhaps to save himself from future embarrassment, to leave this area as soon as possible, he quickly turns around, but soon finds himself right back where he started. There are two Freud's. There is the Freud of the grand theory and universal narrative, where every desire is immediately triangulated in the Oedipus complex, and there is the other Freud of jokes, stories and case studies, where the details, differences and idiosyncrasies continually overflow the theory that tries to imprison and corral them. The same is the case with his essay on the uncanny. At the heart of Freud's interpretation of the uncanny lies his hypothesis of the return of the repressed. We experience a feeling of uncanniness, because some episode from the past returns to visit us in the present, as though the past had not yet done with us. The doubles of the uncanny all have their source in their original temporal doubling, but Freud thinks about this temporal structure in a specific way, which we will need to determine, because there are two pasts at

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<sup>23</sup> Freud, pp. 358–9.

operation here. There is a past that belongs to the present, the present's past so to speak, and there is a past more ancient than any past, a pure past. Freud's theory of the repressed favours the first past over the second, but it is the pure past that has a greater political significance and force.<sup>24</sup>

How can there be two pasts we might wonder? Surely there is only the past of memory. I look through my photographs and remember the past as I once lived it. Yet such a memory is not the experience of the past as past, but of the past as present. I remember the past now as I look at the photographs sitting in this room. If the past were only a memory then there would be no past as such. There would only be present memories, which would be merely less intense experiences of the present. There is another past, more past than any past, which is not the past as present, but the past *of* the present; the passing of the present that belongs to every present, even every future one, such that I know that every memory is never quite what the past was. The past of memory belongs to the individual, to the self that remembers it. The past of the present, the passing of the present, is absolute. It is the past in which every moments passes, and without which there would be no past at all, no sense of the passing of time, and in this way, no possibility of memory either that snatches fragments out of it to reconstitute a self it can barely remember.

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<sup>24</sup> The phrase 'pure past' is Deleuze's and belongs to his critic of Freud in *Difference and Repetition*. See, Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 96–116. Our temporal ontology of the image, which is to be contrasted with its hermeneutic reading, is also indebted to Deleuze's Bergsonism (from which his critic of Freud begins). See, Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), and Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Reprint edition (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 103–30. For Bergson's own account of the past, see H. Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 133–77. We also found Alia Al-Saji's article particularly useful in explaining this ontology of time, Alia Al-Saji, 'The Memory of Another Past: Bergson, Deleuze and a New Theory of Time', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 37.2 (2004), 203–39. Finally, as McGettigan points out, Benjamin's own conception of historical time was inspired by his reading of Bergson. See, Andrew McGettigan, 'As Flowers Turn Towards the Sun: Walter Benjamin's Bergsonian Image of the Past', *Radical Philosophy*, 158 (2009), 25–35.

In one sense, Freud's essay both recognises and fails to recognise this absolute past, the past of the past. It acknowledges it by locating the effect of time in unconscious processes. The past returns without me knowing it. I find myself on the same street without knowing how I got there. Yet Freud always pins this repetition down to an ancient past that functions like a memory. Either the uncanny is to be explained by the repetition of a past moment of the individual's development that has become stuck (castration, for example in the case of Hoffmann's *The Sandman*), or the return of a prehistorical stage of human civilisation (Freud explains the uncanny as a vestige of animism). By anchoring the pure past in an ancient one, Freud transforms what is virtual (the past as the possibility of the future thrown beyond my present as it actually is) into a permanent actuality that constrains the present (the past as the actuality of the present). Repetition becomes repetition of the same, a repeating of something that had happened again and again, whether the Oedipus complex or animism, rather than the repetition of difference, variation without origin. What returns does not have to return as the same. When one reads Kafka's *The Trial*, for example, each reading produces a new version without returning to an original, and it is precisely this movement that is lost when one interprets it, as though it were just one more example of the Oedipus complex. It is as though, having opened up the Pandora's Box of difference, with the proliferation of examples without origin, Freud quickly has to close it down by imposing a schema from above. They are, then, just the same incidents of the castration complex, or animism, repeating themselves.

The paradox of time is that the future does not come after the past, but changes it. It selects from the past that which is repeated, but what is repeated is not the same. The festival comes after the event that bears its name, but it is the festival that gives force and

significance to the event, and not the event bestowing it on the festival. For who would have remembered the Bastille if it had not been repeated, but what is repeated is not the same. When we think of the past, we think of it as unchangeable. What has happened cannot be undone. This is to forget that anything that has happened had to come into existence and its coming into existence was never necessary. There is a difference between what has happened and the happening of what has happened. As Kierkegaard writes, we know the star that shines in the night sky, but the happening of the star, that it exists at all, is still a wonder to us.<sup>25</sup> Each event is surrounded by an aura of possibility in two senses. Every actuality emerges from a field of multiple possibilities of what could have been, and in this actuality every other possibility is overcome but never eliminated. They remain in the absolute past always possible, ready to be selected differently and they announce another future that transforms the past completely (now everything has changed, now we must begin again). Towards the actual I am certain, towards the possible I am not. It is a matter of passion and belief. I say such and such has happened in the past, and in this moment the whole of the present and the future are transformed. I am certain of it. I commit my whole life to this moment, but I can only do so because I have faith in the happening of what has happened, its possibility that is held open into the future.

We are offering two readings of the image. One is hermeneutical and the other ontological. The hermeneutical only sees the cynicism of the image. It understands that the image betrays the revolutionary possibilities contained in the original event. Advertising captures Bukowski's poem and uses it to sell commodities to a commodified subject. This is a story we all know. But the cynical reading only repeats the cynicism of the age, for the advertiser

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<sup>25</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 81.



is also fully conscious of this betrayal, and is no less knowing than the critic. Who is duping whom? It is important to get beneath this theatre of signs to the ontology of time, otherwise we will never be able to escape this circularity. There are two futures. There is the future of the present that is the repetition of the same. Actuality determines possibility and there is no alternative except the dark night of chaos. Yet there is also another future, perhaps more difficult to discern and see, but which is the future of the past, rather than of the present. A future open to possibilities in the past that were never actualised. It is Benjamin's insight to recognise that the phantasmagoria of capitalism is based upon the force of the second future and the very same time that it presents in the language of the first. Capitalism lives in its aborted revolutions, just as it creates surplus from the living creativity of humanity, while trying to reduce it to a commodified form of a revenue-flux. This is not merely an ideological but an ontological error. It feeds from the very vitality it seeks to destroy, just as the Levis advert leeches the sentiment and force of the original Bukowski poem, while leaving everything the same, until its own contradictions are shattered against reality.

### **'There is no Alternative'**

Within the analysis of life under late capitalism, it is often said that we are in a post-political age. Of course this does not mean that politics cease, but rather the forums and possibilities of politics become severely limited and the political realm is reduced to the mechanic of implementing an ever increasingly intensified corporatised and financialised landscape that defends and legitimises itself through an appeal to 'common-sense' and the impossibility of any alternative. It is within this post-political sphere that dissent appears impossible and the population is reduced to bystanders. 2011, the year in which Levis hoped to launch this

advertisement, was also the year of global eruptions of political opposition, from the Arab Spring to the global occupy movement and to the British riots. It was the actual assurance that such forms of protest, dissent and subversion, as depicted in the advert, were anachronistic, belonging to an ancient past, which lead to the depictions in a commercial in the first place. Nothing was going to change, so why not use an image of dissent and of a classless society to sell jeans? They believed that politics is over and only existed as a kind of symbolic capital that one could draw upon to reinforce and consolidate their brand. They only depicted rioting, because they could not have imagined that rioting would actually take place. They could only envision a future present, according to which everything will always be the same, and not a future past, the repetition of difference.

This is the contradiction at the heart of the image. It must ride a line between the symbolic, on the one hand, which is open to hermeneutical cynicism, but attempts to resist it through an appeal to authentic subjectivity, and, on the other, the ontology of the real. It must be parasitic on the world of subversion, yet it must never valorise actual subversion; it can only flirt with subversion's symbolic aspect, never with any actual subversion. The uncanny is what happens when the images fail and expose their own mechanisms, but in so doing reveal the ontological depths on which their own inversion depends. This experience of the uncanny is not a cognitive or semantic one. It is affective and subjective. It does not require, like the hermeneutical critique, that one is 'clever' enough to read the image. It is the generalised anxiety of capitalism that constantly attempts to capture the affective dimension of life, but fails to do so.

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