

**Postcapitalist Desire:
The Final Lectures**

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Lecture One:

What is Postcapitalism?

7 November 2016

MARK FISHER: ...We'll just go through the structure as I see it at the moment. As I say, you can contribute to it, you can shape it — it's an open experiment, this course, starting now, really...

OK. Well, what I was going to do to start off was talk about the negative inspiration for the course. I was going to play you three things, but I'll have to talk these through because the sound isn't working for a reason I can't understand...

(Fisher plays Apple's 1984 Super Bowl commercial, in which a woman wearing colourful sportswear, chased by security guards in riot gear, hurls a sledgehammer into a giant screen, before which sits an army of expressionless grey drones, reminiscent of an address by Big Brother in George Orwell's 1984. At the end, the advert declares: "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like '1984'".¹)

This is the first one — anyone recognise this? Anyone seen this before? *(General murmuring.)* Yeah. It features in the Steve Jobs film, doesn't it? Has anyone encountered it before that?... Yeah? Where have you seen it?

STUDENT #1: Well, I haven't seen the Steve Jobs film...

MF: Oh, you haven't seen the Steve Jobs film...

STUDENT #1: ...But I think someone posted it on Facebook, I guess? I don't have a context here; I just know that it's an Apple Super Bowl commercial.

MF: Yeah, it's definitely worth watching later with the sound... As I say, I can't fix the sound at the moment... The image itself tells the story here. I often polemically say, "This is the most influential film from the last thirty-five years". It was made by... Anyone know who directed that?

STUDENT #2: Ridley Scott.

MF: Yeah, so Ridley Scott directed it and you can tell, can't you? You can tell from the style it's very similar to films that he'd recently made. He had redefined mainstream Hollywood cinematic science fiction via *Alien* and *Blade Runner*, from '79 and '82 I think, so this was two years after that. It's really the best film he's made since then, I think. Probably the only significant film he's made since then.

What this did, really, was seed the idea of many of the tropes that are now, I think, standard in our imagining: the idea of top-down, bureaucratic control systems versus the dynamism of a kind of networked individual mindset.

And what is clever, I think — or certainly significant — all advertising you could say is a form of dreamwork — dreamwork, as Freud says, involves conflation, and a compressing, a condensing of different ideas together. All this does, if you look at the imagery, is it condenses Cold War imagery — which none of you are really old enough to actually remember except historically, I think — Cold War imagery associated with the Soviet Union in particular; negative imagery to do with dreariness, bureaucratic submission of individuals. If you look at the film, these grey drones trudge around being subjected to the ultimately top-down commands coming from the talking head, clearly referencing *1984* of Orwell. (The Orwell estate

wasn't too happy about the ad but that's another story — we'll leave that aside.²) But it conflates that imagery that has long been associated with the Soviet bloc, with imagery to do with big computer corporations, such as IBM, which then dominated the computer world.

Apple is positioning itself as an upstart, as colour intervening into this grey, dreary, bureaucratic world. Apple is new. It's female, interestingly. It's colour intervening in this grey world of bureaucratic monoliths where IBM becomes, in the advertising dreamwork, equated with the Soviet Union. This, then, is the new world that is about to break out of this monolithic, dreary, grey, boring control system. And that's what happened! In a certain way, it was prophetic. It was more than prophetic; you could say it was hyperstitional.³ It helped to bring about the very thing which it was describing.

From my point of view, what I think is interesting about this, then, is the way in which it suggests there is a problem of desire in terms of capital. The thing about the Cold War imagery — what it's suggesting is there is no real desire for... Or rather, there is *only* desire for capitalism. The Communist world, like IBM, and the then dominant corporate capitalist world, is boring and dreary, and that's an objection to it! The new capitalist world won't be like that. The new capitalist world will be about desire in a way that the Communist world won't be.

So that was part of the interest for me in that. I put the PowerPoint [presentation] up on the VLE⁴ so you can watch it with sound later. It's just inevitable you get these bloody problems — actually immediately disproving the underlying message of that: that Apple and Microsoft would be smooth and glitch-free. We've spent five minutes here and we know that isn't the case... (*Laughter.*) So I can't see any reason why that sound isn't working, but it isn't...

Right. The second thing I wanted to show was this commercial from, I think, a similar time. Anyone seen this one? (*Mark plays "Levi's 1984*

Russia”.⁵ As it plays, he describes some of the commercial’s key features, in which a man nervously passes through border control in Russia, as Soviet guards rifle through his case, unearthing Western magazines. Interrupted by the arrival of a superior, they allow the man through who breathes a heavy sigh of relief as he enters into the Soviet Union and, later, his flat, removing a hidden pair of Levi’s blue jeans from his suitcase.)

He’s got his case there... a copy of *The Face*, then the *Style Bible*, the leading magazine of style culture in London... Here he is in his dreary Soviet world. It’s all black and white. Look at his miserable flat that he’s going to. *Oh, but look! (Laughter.)* His life is redeemed because he’s managed to smuggle the Levis into the Soviet Union.

This wasn’t just something made up for the commercial. Levi’s did have that super-fetishised quality in the Soviet Union. So, again, what is this pointing to? The fact that it’s not only that the Soviet bloc was repressive — politically repressive — it also inhibits desire and blocks desire.

These commercials came out, then, at what, in retrospective, we can see was the end of the Cold War. It didn’t seem like it was towards the end then, in the middle of the Eighties. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet system was so quick at the end of the Eighties, no one would have foreseen it from the middle of the Eighties. It still felt like a full-on Cold War that would continue for decades at that point.

So those came from that period. The third thing I was going to show you, which there’s no point showing you at all without the sound...

STUDENT #3: Can I just ask — where was the Levi’s ad shown?

MF: It was shown in the UK. It was a UK ad. Yeah. It was made for the UK.

2010, 5.

⁴⁷ Wolfendale, “So, Accelerationism, What’s All That About?”

⁴⁸ Georg Lukács, *History & Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971, 197.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 143.

⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari famously consider the peculiarities of this view of history and what it has done to our understanding of the modern subject and its values. See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “10,000 B.C.: The Geology of Morals (Who Does the Earth Think It Is?)” in *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

⁵¹ Lukács, *History & Class Consciousness*, 144.

⁵² Ibid., 186.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Wolfendale, “So, Accelerationism, What’s All That About?”

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Nicholas Thoburn, *Deleuze, Marx and Politics*. London: Routledge, 2003, 1.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ For more on “Acid Corbynism”, see: Casper Hughes, “Why Acid Corbynism is the new counterculture we need”, The Independent, 28 February 2018: <<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/acid-corbynism-labour-jeremy-corbyn-counterculture-a8231936.html>>

Lecture One

What is Postcapitalism?

¹ Apple’s 1984 Super Bowl commercial is available to watch here via YouTube: <<https://youtu.be/2zfqw8nhUwA>>

² Given how heavily the advert drew on the imagery of 1984, the George Orwell estate deemed the advert to be an infringement of their copyright and sent a cease-and-desist letter to Apple. See: William R. Coulson, “‘Big Brother’ is Watching Apple: The Truth About the Super Bowl’s Most Famous Ad”. *Dartmouth Law Journal*. Winter 2009, 7 (1): 106–115.

³ A term coined during Fisher’s time with the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick in the late 1990s, “hyperstition”, in its most rudimentary form, refers to a process whereby fictions make themselves real. The Ccru define it for themselves as follows: “Element of effective culture that makes itself real, through fictional quantities functioning as time-travelling potentials. Hyperstition operates as a coincidence intensifier, effecting a call to the Old Ones.” See: Ccru, “Appendix 1: Ccru Glossary”, *Ccru Writings 1997-2003*. Falmouth: Urbanomic Media, 2017, 363.

⁴ The VLE refers to the university’s “Virtual Learning Environment” — an institutional server for sharing educational materials, departmental news, and other information amongst the staff and student bodies.

⁵ “Levi’s 1984 Russia” is available to view on YouTube here:
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3pe-3ZnL8Y>>

⁶ This clip from *Have I Got News for You* is available to watch on YouTube here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3252FSW7OC4>>

⁷ “May ’68” refers to a period of civil unrest in France, when leftist student protests joined forces with a workers’ general strike. The unrest, which centred around universities and factories, brought the country’s economy to a standstill and very nearly brought down the French government.

⁸ Only Antonio Negri was involved in Autonomia. Michael Hardt, born in 1960, and twenty-five years Negri’s junior, was in America and in his mid-teens when the movement began.

⁹ “Touchscreen Capture” is another seminar topic which takes its name directly from one of Fisher’s previous essays. See: Mark Fisher,

“Touchscreen Capture”, *noon: An Annual Journal of Visual Culture and Contemporary Art*, Vol. 6: Post-Online. Gwangju, South Korea: Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 2016.

¹⁰ Text from slide 5:

What are some of the advantages of the concept of postcapitalism (over communism, socialism etc.)?

1. *It is not tainted by association with past failed and oppressive projects.*
2. *It implies victory – capitalism will end and be replaced by something else.*
3. *It starts from what and where we are – what capitalism has already built – its pleasures as well as its oppressions.*

¹¹ Text from slide 6:

What are some of the disadvantages of the concept of postcapitalism?

1. *It remains tied to capitalism (i.e. it might be guilty of ‘capitalocentrism’).*
2. *It does not name a positive project.*
3. *It remains in the temporality of the ‘post-’.*
4. *Not necessarily progressive (see Peter Frase’s *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* — only two of the four futures are progressive!)*

¹² See: Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism*. London: Verso Books, 2016.

¹³ “Luxury Communism” is a term that has its roots in the mid-2000s protest movements that followed the financial crash. See: Brian Merchant, “Fully automated luxury communism”, *The Guardian*, 18 March 2015: <<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/mar/18/fully-automated-luxury-communism-robots-employment>>. See also: Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. London: Verso Books, 2019.