Ahlberg, Oscar; Hietanen, Joel; Soila, Tuomas

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The haunting specter of retro consumption

Oscar Ahlberg
Aalto University School of Business, Finland

Joel Hietanen
University of Helsinki, Finland

Tuomas Soila
University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract
We propose to intensify theorizing on retromarketing and nostalgic consumption by further developing “hauntology” as a conceptual lens for assessing the retro aesthetic as a commodified affective excess of meaning. This allows us to explore the consumption of marketized retro-spective signs not from the perspective of personal experiences or creative meaning-makings but rather as affective encounters that desire in consumption desperately latches onto. In our view, it is thus not an aesthetic satisfaction, nostalgic comfort, or playful emancipations that are offered to us by retro consumption. Following a darker development of hauntology, we find ourselves instead thrust into spectral presences that we can never quite articulate, a haunting within us in an atmosphere of late capitalism where temporal belief in the future has been “cancelled.”

Keywords
Affect, future, ghost, hauntology, nostalgia, retromarketing, specter

Introduction
To mark the 40th anniversary of its iconic Walkman portable cassette player, Sony recently announced the rerelease of the device with great marketing fanfare. However, it was immediately apparent that something was amiss. The newly rereleased model does not have the capability to play the original C-cassette format but is simply a surface-level look-alike shell of the gadget of yore. In the popular press, Hamill (2019) notes that despite the Walkman disappointingly lacking the ability to play the antiquated cassette tape—which, alongside vinyl, is experiencing something
of a resurgence—this remake nevertheless offers users the opportunity to “enjoy” its “heritage design” alongside “cutting edge” digital audio formats. It takes inspiration from a classic design to “remind older people” of the good old days. The question arises as to whether this simulation of yore indeed offers a cozy and nostalgic return to more blissful times or instead constitutes a more sinister “witnessing [of] the fading of your own memories” (Reynolds, 2011: 330)? Today, in an ever-increasing fashion, even such temporal relations to one’s own past now seem to come all but naturally in a fully retro-commodified fashion. They mark a plasticine simulation of one’s youth with a retro-elevated price tag. In this study, we make attempts to peel away the retro veneer and to also look past it to explore its affective horizons.

For marketers and many marketing and consumer research scholars, the old has incessantly been-becoming the newest of the new for some decades now. Concepts such as retromarketing and consumption (e.g. Brown, 1999, 2001a, 2001b; Brown et al., 2003a, 2003b; Goulding, 2014), nostalgia (Brown, 2001a, 2013; Goulding, 1999; Holbrook and Schindler, 2003; Stern, 1992), vintage (Cervellon et al., 2012; Sarial-Abi et al., 2017), and even melancholia (Bradshaw and Chatzidakis, 2016; Cova et al., 2013; Wickstrom et al., 2020) have become common subjects in the literature marking a profound if elusive fascination consumers have with the market-mediated signs of the past.

As commercial offerings, the retro commodity has been defined as aesthetic bricolage that “judiciously combines past and present” (Brown, 1999: 365), involves “searching for authenticity in an inauthentic world” (Brown et al., 2003a: 140), or as Cervellon and Brown (2018b) note, more specifically, “comprises an old-fashioned form, style or setting combined with bang up-to-date performance, technology or functioning” (p. xi). As they point out, both retro and its typical setting in nostalgic appeals have been defined in an array of conceptualizations and binary distinctions in relation to contemporary consumer society (also Brown, 1999, 2018; Kessous et al., 2015). In the early work of Brown (1999, 2001a), the retro aesthetic was also immediately paradoxical. It offered both novel expressions and experiences in the postmodern era but also somehow pointed to an absence of both stability and the belief in a secure future that was previously promised by the union of liberal democracy and capitalism. Indeed, the optimism of the 1970s through to the 1990s was deeply connected to the notion of progress and its symbolic expressions such as the conquest of space and the fall of the Berlin Wall (e.g. Negri, 2008). Futurists like Alvin Toffler wrote about how in the post-Millennium era social relations would accelerate to the point where people would no longer concern themselves with history (see Pantzar, 2010). Indeed, they would rather “look back in anger at the very idea of looking back” (Brown, 2001a: 307). In a memorable literary moment, the philosopher-ideologue Francis Fukuyama (1992) fatefully declared the “end of history”; it would now be liberal democracy and capitalism that would incessantly herald human progress in the wake of the apparent fall of socialist alternatives (also Lewis, 2008).

While today understood as deeply problematic (e.g. Boje, 2006; Cova et al., 2013), this jubilant Western ethos seemingly gripped marketing and consumer research of the time as well, prompting an entire literature on the “liberatory” promises and possibilities of postmodern consumer culture (e.g. Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). It was not without a sense of elation in the texts of retro-scholars as well (see Cova, 1996; Firat and Shultz, 1997), that the “retromarketing revolution” was portrayed as “an invitation to reconceptualize the field” (Brown, 2001a: 303) of marketing. Indeed, marketing is itself generally “deeply utopian” (Maclaran and Brown, 2001: 385), and thus, retro “doesn’t repeat the past, it redeems it” (Brown, 2001a: 312). This has resulted in an array of work on retromarketing that generally maintains a view of consumer experience as a meaningful and enticing sense of accomplishment in their pursuits to possess and encounter the commodified old
This “utopianism” has remained the mainstay of scholarship even as Brown (2001a) also foresaw that an impending constitutive quality of retro would also entail “cultural necrophilia, where every conceivable historical event [. . .] is ripe for resuscitation, reformulation and, naturally, remunerative remarketing” (p. 307).

Here, it is also important to recall that a fascination for the old is by no means a novel postmodern development, as Brown (2001a) catalogues extensively. But, however much we deal with eternal recurrence, there seem to be particular threatening relationalities in the affective atmosphere of our “late capitalist” moment that reverberate powerfully in this time (see Berardi, 2017; Culp, 2016; also Brown, 2006). Following Jameson (1991) in his “effort to take the temperature of [this] age without instruments” (p. xi), we wish to engage in a speculative effort to extend theorizing on the “retromania” of retromarketing and consumption from an affective perspective (Knudsen and Stage, 2015; also Hill et al., 2014). Following Brown’s (2018) and Cervellon and Brown’s (2018b) recent lead, we further develop hauntology as an affective concept (Derrida, 1994; also Gibson-Graham, 1995; Hussey, 2001; Lewis, 2008) through which to peer at retro consumption. Hauntology was coined by the poststructural philosopher Jacques Derrida (1994) to describe the forsaken possibility of social organizing based on Marxist ideas in the increasingly capitalist Europe, denoting a sort of eerie feeling of atmospheric excess that still remains “in the air” due to this loss of an alternative. It is a future that had become derelict, but its foregone possibility still somehow continues to reverberate in all social relations. The strength of this oddly amorphous concept, now increasing in popularity with the rise of the affective and non-representational, is in its uncanny “in-betweenness” (e.g. Davis, 2005; Hussey, 2001), as it hovers betwixt existence and non-existence, absence and presence, visibility and invisibility, material and immaterial, surface and depth, nature and culture, and use-value and exchange-value, the ghost is a liminal thing that dissolves binary oppositions (such as those that haunt our understanding of nostalgia). (Cervellon and Brown, 2018b: 120)

After overviewing the nostalgia induced retro literature in our field, we turn to outline our interpretation of Derrida’s original hauntological notion, and then, we turn to how Mark Fisher (2014) developed the concept to address amiss temporalities in late capitalism, and how affective atmospheres of hope for the future can be seen as increasingly problematic.

While Brown (e.g. 2009, 2015; also Brown et al., 2012; Cervellon and Brown, 2018b) has long been interested in the affective excesses of marketing and consumption that give rise to ghosts, apparitions, shamans, and necromancers in his oeuvre, the notion of hauntology and the more specific speculative theorizing it calls for is still rather novel in marketing literature. These ghostly matters have nevertheless received notable scholarly interest in neighboring fields (e.g. Beyes, 2019; Orr, 2014; Pors, 2016; Pors et al., 2019). Adopting the concept and filtering it through its “darker” no-future sense in Fisher (2014; also Reynolds, 2020), we wish to add to Jameson’s (1991) notion of the postmodern “loss of historical depth, analogous to the schizophrenic’s inability to distinguish fully between past, present and future” (Brown, 2001a: 310) and thus suggest a contemporary zeitgeist that pertains to a striking lack of a temporal horizon of our times (see Carstens, 2018; Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018). To intensify the retro, we thus include in our analysis a more sinister atmosphere seemingly devoid of futures worth anticipating (Berardi, 2017; Bridle, 2019; Culp, 2016; Negri, 2014). From this perspective, a general sense of a “cancellation of future” (Fisher, 2014: 6; also Fisher, 2009) has irrevocably overtaken any “liberatory” promises of
postmodern “freedoms” for sovereign consumer identities (also Gabriel, 2015; Lambert, 2019). What has increasingly foundered is an affective possibility of optimism itself (also Campbell et al., 2019; Shankar et al., 2006), placing any experientially exciting notion of retro into an eerie and pallid spotlight. We argue that retro consumption should be further developed as a hauntological tendency where an excess of meaning in the retro-aesthetic channels consumption desires to desperately latch onto a possibility of futures in its reminiscence of the past—futures now increasingly evaporated.

**Nostalgic consumption and the rise of retro**

*Consumption of the old: From nostalgia to retro*

When speaking of retromarketing and consumption, a general driver of thought has been the notion of how *it was seemingly all better before* (Brown, 2001a). This has been met by a proliferation of commodities saturating the market during the past two decades which tap into this yearning by incorporating retro aesthetics into their form (e.g. Brown, 2013, 2018; Higson, 2014). In marketing literature, this marks a “revival or relaunch of a product or service from a prior historical period” (Brown, 2001a: 308) that “trade on consumers’ nostalgic leanings” (Brown et al., 2003b: 20). The appeal of retro is often written to be closely linked to a *nostalgic longing*, commonly understood as a preference, general liking, positive attitude or favorable effect, towards experiences associated with objects that were more common [...] when one was younger (in early adulthood, in adolescence, in childhood or even before birth. (Holbrook and Schindler, 2003: 108)

In fact, in the literature, nostalgia and retro are all but intertwined conceptually with nostalgia as the affective mood that seeks comfort from the past and retro as commodified simulations of yore that nostalgic longings are prone to attach to (e.g. Brown, 2001a, 2006, 2018; Brown et al., 2003a). An explosion of retro thus occurred in an increasingly “nostalgia-steeped world” (Brown, 2013: 522); shared memory horizons such as the Titanic (Brown et al., 2013), servicescape simulations of old artefacts (Brown, 2013; Hamilton and Wagner, 2014), newly manufactured old products such as rereleased cereals (Brown et al., 2003a), the new VW beetle (Brown et al., 2003b), the unearthly sound of vinyl scratches sampled and mixed into digitalized music production (Fisher, 2014), and even collective performances intended to allow one to “relive” experiences of times past (Belk and Costa, 1998). Thus, marketing literature, hot on its tail, has positioned retro as connecting with collective remembrances of yore, as a sign of authenticity in stressful cosmopolitan life (Brown et al., 2003a), and a desire for a shared past and community (e.g. Muñiz and O’Guinn, 2001; Sierra and McQuitty, 2007). These assessments of nostalgia typically now tend to take on the form of a general disposition toward happy, comforting days of the past (Hamilton and Wagner, 2014; Holbrook and Schindler, 2003)—at worst a “bittersweet sense of what’s gone but not forgotten” (Brown, 2001a: 305)—but leave its ambiguous and affective nature largely elusive and uncharted (Brown, 2018). Instead, retro has often been written about as a pragmatic “strategy” for retro-businesses seeking opportunities to quickly make nostalgic coin (Cattaneo and Guerini, 2012; Hamilton and Wagner, 2014; also Higson, 2014).

What makes the general aesthetic of the retro-commodity theoretically alluring is its striking epistemological differences from other fascinations with the old. A shiny, off-the-conveyor-belt retro-commodity *never occupied* its past but rather is its *pure simulation*, a commoditized *resemblance* that can gesture toward the past in various ways and readily recombine these
aesthetics in a bricolage fashion (e.g. Brown et al., 2001, 2003b). In contrast, antiques and vintage objects, which are indeed also widely coveted and desired (Cassidy and Bennett, 2012; Cervellon et al., 2012; Parsons, 2010), cannot be readily recommodified and reproduced with strong claims of “authenticity”: at the very least, not in a spatiotemporally “indexical” sense (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Fittingly, consumers may often look at the past with a readily monetizable yearning, but the perceived hardships arising from lacking all the features of contemporary life leave them reluctant to actually desire a tangible return to old stuff (Brown et al., 2001). Rather, it is an elusive but select portion of the past they desire to be brought into modern life as an ideological remainder. Retro-commodities are thus irrevocably associated with brands and goods carrying aesthetics which point to ambiguous sheets of the past, created here and now, updated and repackaged to the expected performance of modern technological standards (also Brown, 2001a; Brown et al., 2003b), in effect purging all potentially negative historical connotations (Brown, 1999; Brown et al., 2001; Hamilton and Wagner, 2014). Their fabricated historicity instead becomes an aesthetic befitting a commercial sales pitch; the VW beetle may have been a celebrated icon of German car engineering, but it was also (in)famously connected with the Germany of Hitler and Nazism (Brown et al., 2003b).

If the allure of nostalgia is now written in the promise of happiness and meaning as the image of the past, its marketized production is focused on selling various claims of “authenticity” (e.g. Beverland, 2005; Brunninge and Hartmann, 2019). However, it has also been suggested that in a consumer society of repetitious production of commodified offerings the meaning of anything “real” or “authentic” is increasingly problematic and elusive (Baudrillard, 2007; also Hartmann and Ostberg, 2013; Hietanen et al., 2020a). When consumers have “seen it all before” and nothing is any longer novel (Brown et al., 2003a), the past becomes abstracted, providing fertile grounds for managerial constructions of the most “authentic” look-alike versions of times past, foregone settings, and stories (Beverland, 2005; Brown et al., 2003a; Hamilton and Wagner, 2014). In these simulations, retro-objects thus serve as ephemeral reminders, pinches on one’s arm to remember a time of myth and legend before mass production and commercialization engulfed contemporary existence—which is generally perceived as a root cause of modern disenchantment (e.g. Brown et al., 2001; Hartmann and Ostberg, 2013; Higson, 2014).

Previous conceptualizations have thus tended to focus on three things: the emergence of retro, vintage, and nostalgia as predominantly affirmatory, meaningful, and comforting consumption of the past (e.g. Brown, 2001b; Brown et al., 2003a); the concept’s implications for marketing practice (Cattaneo and Guerni, 2012; Hamilton and Wagner, 2014; Simmons, 2008); and its possibilities for newfound consumer expression (Cervellon and Brown, 2018a, 2018b.; Cervellon et al., 2012; Holbrook and Schindler, 2003; Sierra and McQuitty, 2007). Yet, within the nostalgic elements of retro that make it meaningful—or indeed sellable—one can also uncover a sinister lurking potential in extant theorizing. Specifically, there is a persistent and elusive, if mostly implicit, sense of instability in how retro taps into temporalities, if only to profit from their simulation. Holbrook and Schindler (2003), for example, note an exception amidst positive connotations in security-oriented nostalgia where a contemporary sense of uncertainty is sought to be remedied through nostalgic objects. Similarly, Brown (2001a) attests that an aspect of nostalgia is its link to “a passing emotional perturbation pertaining to remembrance of times past [ ... ] longing and a bittersweet sense of what’s gone but not forgotten” (p. 305). Brown’s definition thus includes an inherent sense of loss, a feeling of trying to obtain something of past times that remains out of reach. This has also has led him to note the insufficiency of an optimistic account of nostalgia alone to explain the persistence of the retro phenomenon (Brown, 2013, 2018; also Brunk et al., 2018).

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has been also pointed out that any account of nostalgia that misses the cruciality of painful longing, lack, and instability in the present fails to understand how nostalgia operates by fetishizing the past to save the present (Higson, 2014; Wickstrom et al., 2020). We need to remember that the term nostalgia translates from its Greek roots as pain and distress to return safely home or to escape. The concept had its origin in 1688 as a way to describe the disease of homesickness (Kessous and Roux, 2008) and up until recently “one could say almost anything about nostalgia, as long as it was damning and few would object” (Bonnett, 2010: 3). From the perspective of marketing and consumer research, it would seem that nostalgia has become to signify almost the opposite of its origins; from malady to a pleasurable (and readily packageable) sensation (Cervellon and Brown, 2018b).

The “darker” side of nostalgic yearning is seldom decisively encountered in the literature, and such notions become all too quickly swept under the rug of expeditious marketing practice. The paradox is clear in Brown’s entire oeuvre as well, for while there is always something eerie and unaccountable in the retro-aesthetic, the rise of retromarketing has tended to maintain an exciting futuristic promise in its form of a “fusion of past and future, a postmodern marketing amalgam of new-and-improved with as-good-as-always” (Brown, 2001a: 306). As such, nostalgic thought has already been written as “a communal escape from reality [...] an all-singing, all-dancing, all-systems-go” (Brown, 2007: 296) hopefulness linked to a past “that never actually existed” (p. 296). In more recent work, the promise of this potential has turned to “neo-burlesque” in more attempts to uncover possibilities for an emancipatory or even revolutionary consumer subjectivity (Cervellon and Brown, 2018b).

**Uncertain futures—Now increasingly even in marketing literature too?**

Following the heyday of liberatory potential in postmodernity in marketing and consumer research (e.g. Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Firat et al., 1995), it seems that doubt and pessimism about the times ahead are increasingly entering the field (e.g. Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016; Cluley and Dunne, 2012; Cronin and Cocker, 2019; Hietanen and Andréhn, 2018; Zwick, 2018), and related literature has critically and pessimistically examined temporal relations to our future to a greater extent (e.g. Campbell et al., 2019; Hietanen et al., 2020b). Early on in marketing, Maclaran and Brown (2001) wrote that “no-topia is the utopia of our sated postmodern times” (p. 370). This was followed by Shankar and colleagues’ (2006) notion of a more desperate societal trajectory in Western consumer societies, where it would seem that material well-being was not bringing about well-becoming, even for the affluent. The authors argued that recent market developments are increasingly characterized by a failure to provide the future promised by the advent of neoliberal capitalism (Zwick, 2018), where the illusion of consumer goods as a provider of happiness is becoming harder to maintain (also Cluley and Dunne, 2012; Lambert, 2019).

Critical scholarship outside marketing and consumer research has in parts become even darker, to the point where it has now been noted that our attention spans and communality are being devastated in the ever-intensifying global communications and automation of late capitalist tendencies (e.g. Bridle, 2019; Stiegler, 2014; also Cronin and Cocker, 2019). Instead, we are now all but completely unable to fathom any real alternatives to accelerating capitalist global orders (Berardi, 2017; Fisher, 2009; Gilbert, 2015; Jameson, 1991) where societally “dominant feelings today are probably anxiety or depression [...] a constant low-level distress” (Culp, 2016: 48–9). These sensibilities seem only to be amplified by an affective atmosphere of ever-increasing precarization of life and the impending existential threat of a climate crisis to which capitalism
seemingly has no other approach than its emergent escalation (e.g. Campbell et al., 2019; Swyngedouw, 2010). Most powerfully, such notions have been attributed by Mark Fisher (2014) to an affective horizon today that unconsciously senses a creeping and unstoppable “slow cancellation of the future” (p. 6). This affective backdrop, even for those who can be viewed as relatively economically secure in the West, is now something increasingly politically disenchanted (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015); a sentiment that has also been called a vapid “disaffected consent,” a future foreclosed by a general “mood of dread” (Gilbert, 2015; also Zwick, 2018).

What Fisher’s (2014) analysis so poignantly reveals is how it is the modus operandi driven by a belief in the future or continuous progress itself that is increasingly evaporating from expressions in popular culture. With a meticulous focus on the music industry, Fisher (2014) outlines how new aesthetic ideas in sound and atmosphere have been increasingly gloomy and lugubrious for decades now, and any novelty that might have been able to channel excitements and imaginations have been all but replaced by digitalized remixing and remashing samples from the past (also Gilbert, 2015; Reynolds, 2020). While Fukayama’s statement concerning the demise of history appeared to hail the ultimate victory of the capitalist way of life and the promise of an unhindered movement toward its future, we seem to have instead become obsessed with past time in terms of digital archiving: what was lost, or is lost, or can still be lost (also Huyssen, 2000; Lyotard, 2004). There may be vast amounts of data, but its ubiquity and instantaneity increasingly flatten a sense of depth in time. This confusion is not helped by instantaneous digital global connectivity (social, financial, military); a loss of temporal distance is increasingly seeing history crashing into the present and thus continuously cultivating the ahistoricity of late capitalism as a continuous present. It would thus seem that as more and more historic eras and all their subsequent signs are invoked by our time, the more our present circumstances have become characterized by nothing else than “history itself.”

Consequently, in a contemporary atmosphere increasingly marked by its own lack of alternatives and a “future being slowly cancelled,” the past becomes not only attractive, but the only open avenue, offering comfort in what once was (also Maclaran and Brown, 2001). However, while retro may be marketed on the premise of its historical appeal, functionally it is the epitome of modern technological know-how. In a full production of its own temporal simulation, retro, in contrast to vintage and personal nostalgic objects which retain some indexicality to their historical context, plucks artefacts from history and strips them bare of all their problematic de facto historical context. We believe that retro revives inert temporal imaginations, turning them into zombified spectacles as part of the marketized myth of commodified authenticity (also Hietanen et al., 2020a). And the more the retro-necromancer (Brown, 2009) resurrects the past, the more the past will likely haunt us, a painful reminder of what we desperately seek to fend off.

The haunting of Stephen Brown

Before we elaborate further on the ghostly theoretical background of our analysis, let us elucidate one key moment driving our present efforts here. While many scholars have indeed trod these boards before us, we feel we must make note of one in particular who has engaged in a long-standing and proliferate effort to increase the visibility of the retro-nostalgia conjunction in both marketing and consumer research literature. For us, there seems to be a key moment of irresistible revelation when we face and are engulfed by the sheer array of Stephen Brown’s work on the topic, which is both literarily intricate and exhaustive in its plenitude of exemplary cases from the market. Yet, when mulling over this corpus, one is stricken by an aporia in the publication record
of his retro-endeavor. It almost feels as if there is an emptiness that despite all imaginable effort, never quite became satiated and thus cannot seem to offer solace or release for Brown, insisting his constant return to offer himself again to the subject.

What seems to be perpetually missing, to constantly elude Brown’s otherwise notable erudition, is any theoretical conclusion in the form of an affirmative. Throughout his oeuvre, it is as if he seems perpetually at the cusp of a theoretical breakthrough, whether an elaboration of nostalgia in consumption or the paradoxical nature of the retro-object, but something seems to be keeping him from it. In his work on retro—which now spans two decades—the notion seems like an “itchy awareness that something more is at stake” (Pors, 2016: 1656) and refuses to surrender itself into a concept, perhaps in a similar fashion to Freud’s frustration at being rendered perennially irresolute by the notion of the “uncanny” (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013). Why does it refuse to be resolved? Instead, Brown keeps finding recourse to yet another outpouring of intricate and diverse examples, from commercial offerings such as the VW Beetle and camper van, Heinz soup, Apple products, and 101Zs Lee Jeans, to other culturally symbolic artefacts such as the Titanic movie and the Mad Men TV series (e.g. Brown, 1999, 2013, 2018; Brown et al., 2003b). As Brown notes, the persistence of the retro-aesthetic comes to him as a something of a continuous surprise, a phenomenon that seems to be alarmingly ever-intensifying rather than saturating (see Brown, 2013, 2018; Cervellon and Brown, 2018). Why does it refuse to die? He has also noted how more optimistic notions of “nostalgia” do not suffice to explain retro (Brown, 2013), described the marketing of “death” itself is an important category (Brown et al., 2012), and has extended his eloquent vocabulary to embrace the idea that what may be going on is “cultural necrophilia,” where marketer-necromancers “raise the dead” (Brown, 2009: 170). Indeed, he discussed Kotler as a specter early on (Brown, 2002) and has already noted the vertiginous oblivion of contemporary consumption (Bradshaw and Brown, 2018). Importantly, in recent work, he has engaged with the concept of hauntology directly (Brown, 2018; Cervellon and Brown, 2018b) as well, but even with all this attention, it stubbornly seems to offer little more than a curious aside, rather than something that might bring explanatory solace.4

We would like to suggest that Brown himself is haunted by the rather evident impasse in his retro-theorizing! There is a whisper from the specter that is alluding the affective register of retro and its indecisive futures to him (see Brown, 2018), but he seems to instead have been irrevocably selected to find what is more meaningful, even “emancipatory” or “revolutionary” in retro consumption (Cervellon and Brown, 2018b). It is this apparition that insists that he must continuously return to his own retromania propagated by the retro phenomenon. It is the darker side of this specter with which we wish to converse, both to offer—if only tentative—theoretical avenues leading away from this seemingly interminable situation and to intensify affective theorizing of retro in contemporary consumer culture. While stuff in the material context is what tends to fascinate Brown the most (see Cervellon and Brown, 2018b), we wish to attempt a foray away from it.

Enter the specter in contemporary capitalist society

The question of hauntology

To further theoretically ground the looming affective atmosphere of contemporary times, it is time to look closer into how the specter of hauntology came into being conceptually. Originally given as an address in 1993 to the audience of the Whither Marxism? conference at University of California, Riverside, and later published as Specters of Marx (1994), it was the French poststructural
philosopher Jacques Derrida (1994) who coined hauntology. The work was in response to the spirit of the 1990s, which was busy jubilating the fall of the Berlin wall and the notion that liberal capitalism had definitively “won” at least in the sense of an ideal if not entirely in reality; now to be treated as the unquestionable form of social order. For Derrida, hauntology was a way to approach an ambiguous and irrevocably undecided cultural longing, an affective sense in the air that a part of history had gone missing but still continued to reverberate in the air (also Jameson, 2008). More specifically, what is haunting Europe was the “failure” of alternative social orders based on Marxist ideas that never manifested in a full sense (also Lewis, 2008; Negri, 2008). There is thus something in the present zeitgeist that carries with it that which never came to be.

“Time is out of joint,” Derrida (1994) thus continuously repeats in a shamanistic fashion throughout his text. This disjointedness is set up not as a representational state of affairs but rather an affectively painful encounter with a spectral presence. It is the revenant ghost in Shakespeare’s Hamlet; even if currently offstage, always potentially about to reenter, a historical whisper, that makes all present relations feel eerie and uncanny in ways one cannot quite map out or articulate (also Fisher, 2014; Lewis, 2008). As such, time being out of joint is about time but also necessarily its absence (also Lyotard, 2004), marking an affective excess of that which was long ago jettisoned and assumed forgotten.

It should be noted that a clear conceptual distinction is made between the phantom and the specter in the literature. As Davis (2005) notes, two distinct forms of hauntological speculation have become popularized: Derrida’s and the chronologically prior version by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. For the latter, hauntology was concerned with ancestral phantoms, personalized apparitions that could make themselves present in undiscovered traumas of their descendants, “secrets” that can surface even if they had no explicit knowledge of such forgotten multigenerational histories (also Fiddler, 2019; Orr, 2014). Derrida’s specters are ontologically quite distinct, as they in no way denote an actual or personalized existence of ghosts (Fiddler, 2019), but concern a more general affective sense of temporal “presence and absence, and making established certainties vacillate [... which do] not belong in the order of knowledge” (p. 376). For Derrida, thus, the specter rather marks an uncanny opening rather than a possibility for some historical “secret” as “determinate content to be uncovered” (p. 377). The specter is not a marker of possible closure about history but a gesture from an alternative past toward an unformulated and uncertain future, a “sense of lurking unease, rather than [...] any clearly defined source of fear” (Beyes, 2019: 186), requiring more a “séance to be teased out than an exorcism to be expelled” (Fiddler, 2019: 6). The specter is thus not resolute or teleological and therefore offers no catharsis at the end of the story. Instead, it continues to mark an insecure and always partial beginning (Orr, 2014), a spectrality of historicity where it is seen how “the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us” (Jameson, 1991: 39).

While amassing criticism for lacking an emancipatory political dimension (Eagleton, 2008; Negri, 2008) and a problematically patriarchal tone (e.g. Holland, 2001), Derrida’s “rehabilitation of ghosts as a respectable subject of enquiry has proved to be extraordinarily fertile” (Davis, 2005: 373) broadly in the fields of sociology, literary criticism, race, gender studies, and media studies, among others (Lincoln and Lincoln, 2015). Hauntology has become the speculative and post-phenomenological study of the excessive in relations that overcode each situation (e.g. Blackman, 2007; Pawlett, 1997; Roberts, 2013). It seeks a connection to the unbearable in the affective horizon that mark “a penumbral burden of suppressed meanings and closed-off social possibilities that cannot be completely eliminated or denied” (Gibson-Graham, 1995: 25; also Davis, 2005;
Hussey, 2001). While modernity, in its attempt to rationalize and disenchant thought, has done much to ostracize the idea of an unspeakable and even directly unthinkable excess (Beyes and Steyaert, 2013; Pawlett, 1997; Roberts, 2013), we can find it in action everywhere in neurosis, perversion, and psychosis (e.g. Gabriel, 2012; Lambert, 2019; Schuster, 2016) and in the intensities of the “seductive” characteristics of consumption spectacles (Hietanen et al., 2020a). Derrida’s haunting denotes similar overwhelming relations but with a temporal twist that brings in “broken fragments of time” (Pors, 2016: 1646), where the historical force of hauntology exists, undergirding every present, and thus should be seen as in no way “an abnormal state” (Fiddler, 2019: 3).

As such, it can also be understood as a “cultural memory” but of the most abstract kind where it is only carried from event to event without necessarily being actively remembered in any coherent way (Etkind, 2009)—that “what could be otherwise” but what nevertheless never quite made it.

**The excesses of the specter in contemporary theory**

Derrida’s notion is challenging in the sense that it marks a speculative postphenomenological relation that is, in effect, something unrecognizable, something that cannot be written about or even thought about in a direct fashion. Yet, similar notions abound in critical social theory. A rather obviously related concept can be found in Freud’s notion of the *unheimlich* often translated as the “uncanny” thereafter, which marks an affective mode of disquiet, or “the strange within the familiar” (Fisher, 2016: 10), an “unconcept” rather than a representation (Beyes, 2019; Beyes and Steyaert, 2013). When one surveys other continental thinkers, similar notions are plentiful. In the realm of the aesthetic, Lyotard (2004) described “anamnesis,” which denotes a haunting interminable presence that keeps “present what is forgotten” (p. 107). A similar undertaking is present in Barthes’ (1981) *punctum*, where every artistic work of photography produces a haunting memory of the dead, and thus “every photograph is this catastrophe” (p. 32). One is also reminded of Levinas’ (2016) *d´echet* or “trace,” which denotes a revelation of an ethical sensibility that for him we have all but forgotten in capitalist social relations (also Herzog, 2015; Hietanen and Sihvonen, 2020). Like hauntology, it deals with spectrally affective background reverberations which do “not show itself to me, save through the trace of its reclusion” (Levinas, 2016: 140). Mark Fisher (2016) also focused on the “weird and the eerie” in his later work not directly connected to hauntology as a concept.

Derrida, however, seems more directly concerned with the disjointedness, disturbances, and disorientations of temporality (also Lewis, 2008; Negri, 2008). Thus, hauntology marks the spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: “now,” future present). (Derrida, 1994: xix)

While Derrida’s haunting is irrevocably tied to Marx, and may indeed be evermore relevant in contemporary late capitalist times in general, we wish to now turn to another kind of hauntology—that of a consumer attempting to find meaning in the contemporary market. While Derrida develops his hauntology precisely as a Marxist criticism of the 1990s hubris concerning the triumph of capitalist liberal democracies, Fisher (2014) turns the argument toward a spectral presence of this lost optimism itself. What for Derrida may still be seen to constitute an affective sense of longing for a lost alternative is that which has gone entirely missing in Fisher’s grim loss of any fathomable future imaginaries in late capitalism. What remains similar, however, is how hauntology is irreducibly grounded in a problematization of a stable temporal timeline (Pors, 2016), and provides a
speculative explanation as to why the simulation of the retro can work within the late capitalist moment characterized by ahistoricity, and thus the foundational breakdown of the past–present–future continuum (Jameson, 1991; also Patterson et al., 2008; Tadajewski and Saren, 2008). In late capitalism, time appears as a pastiche (Jameson, 1991), a present over-encumbered with whichever aesthetic decade is told and sold and thus a dearth of “the very sense of history” (Brown et al., 2001: 58), a cancelled future (Fisher, 2014) incapable of imagining alternatives (Berardi, 2017; Fisher, 2009). In marketing literature, such sensibilities were already poignantly put forth by Maclaran and Brown (2001), in the case of the present generation’s inability to form a utopian vision and the subsequent abandonment of attempts at dreaming of a perfect future. It has been also suggested that we have arrived at an aesthetic impasse, where artistic forms such as music production have turned to continuously recycling the old rather than inventing any new and energizing alternatives (e.g. Fisher, 2014; Gilbert, 2015; Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018). Furthermore, with the rise of digital archives, things that once appeared lost in the sea of time to never resurface have come to suddenly reemerge everywhere (Darmody and Zwick, 2020; Higson, 2014). In these “conditions of digital recall, loss is itself lost” (Fisher, 2014: 2), and they now mark a past short-circuited and outside collective remembrance as digital technology comes to remember, control, and market an algorithmically splintered “dividual” of us and for us (Arvidsson, 2016; Cluley and Brown, 2015; Hietanen et al., 2020b). As Jean Baudrillard (1998) noted, “When everything can be seen, nothing can be foreseen any more” (p. 2), pointing to an obsession reviving and reliving, a simulation of a virtual history, a retrovirus, history as ghosts (also Tanner, 2016).

In contrast to what has previously been written in marketing and consumer research, we find the connection between a consumer experience of nostalgic longing and the retro-offering representationally meaningful only in a superficial sense, such as those intended for actionable marketing strategies. We thus see the desire for retro consumption as a far more desperate desiring impulse—a largely unconscious attempt to reinsert a sense of history in culture that has largely occluded it, to invoke any depth in history. Indeed, “nostalgia that is now so pervasive may best be characterized not as a longing for the past so much as an inability to make new memories” (Fisher, 2014: 113). In terms of consumption, it is here where the sign of the retro “dreams of its predecessor” (Baudrillard, 2007: 51), a wish to rediscover in it a relation with a real occluded in capitalist production, subsumed under a logic of signs in free flotation (also Hietanen et al., 2020a). What we seemingly have is retro-bondage rather than a more affirmative experience that could be seen to rehabilitate a simulation to a relation in the world. In this sense, “we must also recognize the extent to which capitalist dystopia of 21st-century culture is not something that was simply imposed on us—it was built on our captured desires” (Fisher, 2014: 25). This produces immense affective appeal in the consumption of retro-offerings (also Brown, 1999; Brown et al., 2001). While Derrida’s hauntology points to lost possibilities of social orders that did not materialize, the haunting in late capitalism and the simulated retro-commodity are about lost possible relationalities that consumers have never experienced first-hand—they work as uncanny reveries only under the condition that they have not.

Retromarketing: The necromancer of temporality

We have attempted to peel away the retro veneer to explore some of its affective horizons. While retromarketing has generally been conceptualized on the basis of a historical temporality where retro denotes a meaningful experience with nostalgic pasts, we have outlined how our present
affective horizon is plagued by a slow ongoing cancellation of the future (e.g. Fisher, 2014; Negri, 2014), a contemporary lack of utopian thinking and an ensuing commodification of a retro-aesthetic, promising the possibility of futures in its reminiscent transportation toward a *simulation* of the past.

While the powerful allure of retro consumption has mainly been attributed to its ability to evoke enjoyable nostalgic memories (e.g. Hamilton and Wagner, 2014; Holbrook and Schindler, 2003; Sierra and McQuitty, 2007), we problematize the representational and experiential view of retro consumption prevalent in current marketing and consumer research and argue for an affective reading of retro following the work of Mark Fisher (2014) in particular. For us, the simulated retro-aesthetic is not lovingly bittersweet but far more desperate. Instead, retro is inherently hauntological, more deeply and intensely so than it has been for Brown (2009, 2013, 2018) and colleagues to date (see Cervellon and Brown, 2018b). It is better understood as an “unconcept” or an “absent aesthetic” that never had a temporal presence in actuality, a simulation of historical signs without any temporal index, and thus connects strikingly to the collapse of temporality itself. And, while retromarketing has been traditionally described as aesthetically from “usually an earlier decade or identifiable epoch” and “which may or may not be updated to contemporary standards of performance, functioning or taste” (Brown, 2001a: 308), we believe the affective hauntological situation is more problematic and far more elusive.

In a late capitalist mode of mass production that has come to occlude any stable authentic relations (Baudrillard, 2007; also Hietanen et al., 2020a), retro is unable to denote any “real” connection with a past. The *very form of retro thus becomes spectral*—a desiring relation seeking to retain a belief in inhabitable futures, an act of disavowal (also Bradshaw and Zwick, 2016), all the more haunting as it emerges through fantasy (also Gabriel, 2015). The production of a consumer culture and the promise of a materially “happy” future has seemingly arrived at an aesthetic impasse (also Shankar et al., 2006), where artistic forms such as electronic music production have turned to continuously recycle the old rather than invent any new energizing alternatives (e.g. Fisher, 2014; Gilbert, 2015; Hietanen and Andéhn, 2018). Retro, as an “absent aesthetic,” points a finger at illusory times of yore only to represent and rebrand them, a quandary of historical involutions unmoored from temporal demands and which can only simulate a *virtual* history and a repetition of the loss of possibility. In this register, retro is not a meaningfully representational consumer experience but instead denotes an affective excess of meaning (also Pawlett, 1997) that consumers desperately cling to; temporal pieces of flotsam offering glimpses of past futures.

For us, the problem of retro is thus first ontological and only then epistemological. All attempts at “making sense” of retro thus *actively engage in creating representational impasses*, as it should instead be approached affectively. In late capitalism wrought with irresolvable paradox (Jameson, 1991; also Hietanen et al., 2013; Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016), where alternatives to the prevalent system seem all but impossible to imagine (e.g. Berardi, 2017; Fisher, 2009; Zwick, 2018), it is not surprising that the desire to consume an authentic relation now seems to be attracted to signs that demonstrate their tangential opposite. In this sense, the affective form of the retro-aesthetic may be something to describe with “manic” connotations (e.g. Brown, 2018), for it simulates not only its history but also the absence of its commodified mass production (also Hietanen et al., 2020a). Yet, in its paradoxicality, it cannot separate itself from its affective excess, which is indeed simultaneously attractive in channeling desires and perpetually haunting in how it continues to temporally cast them astray. The paradoxical logic of retro is thus how it promises a relation it is unable to deliver but that becomes all the more desired for it. Indeed, one has to ponder on whether retro obscures the very possibility of the relation it seemingly offers. To approach retro is thus to
approach the ongoing cultural fragmentation of temporality. Retro may be about “experience” but one of irreducible loss.

As such, we echo Jameson’s (1991) statements that the temporality of the present is hardly as stable as it might appear. We believe affectively charged concepts such as hauntology are increasingly necessary for such tasks. Our work intends to intensify our thinking concerning the excesses of affect at play when we consider the cultural commodification of retro. While these connections may remain esoteric and challenging, we nevertheless hope they have brought about a haunting capacity, where the subliminality of the event where “I remember that I no longer remember” (Lyotard, 2004: 118) is revealed, even if only in a necessarily passing fashion. If nothing else, we find it of paramount importance to peek behind the curtain to view retro from a more theoretically striking vantage point. For as much as we would like to believe that “retro is a harbinger of revolution, it is a pre-figuration, an ‘anticipatory illumination’ of the future” (Brown, 2001a: 312), we are unable to see any salient emancipatory potential in such forms of consumption (Cervellon and Brown, 2018b) but indeed just the opposite. Perhaps, we are just destined to our dark affects. Many may yet remain more optimistic, and if our speculative account proves convincing, those who readily see less-than-fully capitalized subjectivities can still hope to raise more critical awareness. For what if we saw the shell of the new Walkman inversely—what if what we could see through its retro facade the destruction of the particular commodified temporality that created its desire-channeling form in the first place?

As long ago as the 1970s, Alvin Toffler famously predicted that the human mind would fragment in a future-oriented information overflow (see Pantzar, 2010). While his notions may still ring true in the ever-intensifying spread of social media, automation, and the dissolution of lasting communities, it may be equally true that there are also amounts of inputs coming in from the virtual past. Fukuyama may indeed be proved to be more accurate than what was imagined in the outcry following his assertions, but only insofar as his speculations are stripped from all their optimistic allure (also Swyngedouw, 2015). While we have further developed the concept of hauntology in relation to retromarketing, it is important to recognize that hauntology characterizes a general cultural atmosphere of late stage capitalism. Indeed, to be a marketing scholar today is in effect to exercise hauntology, a half-lost remembering that we no longer participate in the optimisms of the past, as the happy days of marketing have increasingly evaporated along with the promise of liberation via consumption (also Takhar, 2020). The specter of Kotler’s marketing optimism (Brown, 2002) has become marketing’s own hauntological past where its own future was still visible. In this sense, marketing is entrenched and looks forward by digging backward (Patterson et al., 2008), a paradox Brown (2001b) elucidates when he advocates for the future of marketing by resurrecting the snake oil salesman while he simultaneously fears the excavation and revival of “Kotlerkamun” slumbering in his tomb (Brown, 1999). No wonder marketing strives to disappear into ubiquity (Darmody and Zwick, 2020). Following Brown (2009), we are increasingly destined to be scholars of necromancy, as for us it now it seems there are no other futures to seriously entertain.

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ORCID iDs
Oscar Ahlberg https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2954-5501
Joel Hietanen https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4512-5627

Notes
2. Not to mention the utopian nature of the entire discursive project of academic branding that became known as consumer culture theory in its keenness to combine diverse methodological approaches as well as managerially inclined academics with social sciences (see Arnould and Thompson, 2005), as we were made unmistakably aware by one of our reviewers.
3. Including the current COVID-19 pandemic and the global economic depression it is likely to herald
4. Perhaps this may be due to Brown’s continuous insistence on the empirical and the material as ways to approach and explain the retro (e.g. Cervellon and Brown, 2018b).
5. Davis (2005) also notes that hauntology bears close resemblance to the Levinasian idea of the infinite Other, where the only possible and truly ethical relationship is to sense but never to attempt to totalize it. It thus replaces “the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (p. 373).

References


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Oscar Ahlberg is a doctoral student at the Department of Marketing, Aalto University School of Business. His interests include theorizing desire and affect in the increasingly technological relations of semicapitalism. Address: Aalto University School of Business, Ekonominaukio 1, 02150 Espoo, Helsinki, Finland. [email: oscar.ahlberg@aalto.fi]

Joel Hietanen is an associate professor at Centre for Consumer Society Research, University of Helsinki. His recent work has been focusing on sacrifice and the intensification of capitalist desire in algorithmically mediated spaces. Address: University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 4 (Yliopistonkatu 3), FI-00014, Helsinki, Finland. [email: joel.hietanen@helsinki.fi]

Tuomas Soila is a doctoral student at Centre for Consumer Society Research, University of Helsinki. His interests include how money and debt drive social relations in market societies in diverse ways. Address: University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 4 (Yliopistonkatu 3), FI-00014, Helsinki, Finland. [email: tuomas.soila@helsinki.fi]