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Back on Track

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Abstract

This paper addresses the current nostalgia mode, from the most diverse areas of merchandising and cultural production to the very contours of today's 'connected' sociality. Current nostalgia seems to impede creativity and the very idea of a future, which would appear to be unthinkable without being filtered by the the sepia lens of a cosmetic vision of the past. In TV programs, cinema, fashion or advertisement, cars or pop music, our time is the time of quotation, revival, and remake. It is a zombie time in which the future coincides with the generational time one regrets the loss of. It is a cosmetic time of hyperkinetic immobility, in which the future is a retro concept – a time that deprives subjectivity back into a full sense of its contemporaneity.

What follows is the draft of a TEDx talk titled "Nostalgia for the future" which took place on 29 March 2014 in Bergamo. The conference theme was 'light', framed in the Enlightenment tradition as a sign of progress, change and innovation. Within such context the talk questioned the very possibility of change – or, better still, the very possibility to conceive the future and linearity of time – in contemporary culture. This paper maintains the conversational mode that first shaped that 18 minutes TEDx talk. Consistent to this frame, the meagre stage directions: a bench right at the centre of the stage, on which a middle-aged man (he must be 45-ish), wearing a worn-out velvet jacket, a t-shirt, jeans, and a pair of 'fake dirt' Converse sneakers. From his backpack he extracts some books, a tablet, and a teddy bear. And good evening: he looks up at some imaginary interlocutors in the audience.

Speaking of lights. Last summer, on the hills, I happened to see some fireflies. Probably just three or four of them. I hadn't seen them for thirty years: my heart skipped a beat. I had virtually forgotten their existence. Do you *remember* fireflies? Yes: those insects just as beautiful at night as they were disappointing in full light, when we tried and capture their charm. All of a sudden, I remembered them. I remembered seeing them quite often, in the summer evenings, in a small park near my home. Of course: who does not remember them, fireflies, wiped out by pollution, along with butterflies. And now that world was emerging again, in flickers. My first gig: ten-year-old me, the Rockets playing in a small stadium, at walking distance from home. Do you remember? it was 1978, *On the Road Again*, their hit single, the silver varnished ultrapop version of Kraftwerk, one that was good for the whole family, kids included? Well, I do also remember the anisette or coke-flavoured ice lolly that costed a mere 50 liras at the time, and – let's just state it loud and clear – it was so much better than today's ice lollies. I remember, after our afternoon snack, turning TV on to watch *Heidi*, whose melancholic touch would soon make room to the *Goldrake* and *Jeeg* robot fights. I do remember – and neatly so, in a seemingly unprocessed subjective take – when my fifth grade school teacher dramatically announced that Aldo Moro's dead body had been found. And I do remember that the red Renault 4 hiding his dead body was in fact *grey*, in our black & white media memory. And the wonder in our eyes, when soon after we got a colour TV set. And a few years later, the remote control! I remember the first video games, the inflatable plastic bubbles 'Crystal Ball', the 1982 World Cup (won not apparently by accident like the 2006 World Cup, leaving no traces in the collective imagination: 1982 was incredible, an epic and unique experience, just like Tardelli's primeval, silent shout after scoring Italy's second goal), the foreign football players in the early Eighties, Zico playing at Udinese, Falcao at A.S. Roma, our provincial world opening up to the whole world, Socrates playing at Fiorentina and the *saudade*, the nostalgia that Brazilians suffered from as they moved to Italy. It was the first time that I associated the word *nostalgia* to a full category of people, and real ones too: before that, nostalgia was an individual feeling, the one Heidi experienced in Frankfurt as she missed the mountains, her grandfather, Peter, and the goats. Brazilians were suffering, and in some cases their performance was disappointing – Socrates, for instance, was never up to expectations – because they were too far from home, from that primal spot on a fantastic globe that was so much larger than today, whose call never let them settle in here. Or just be themselves.

I remember: saying so today means summoning a recent but noble tradition. The tradition of Joe Brainard and Georges Perec, who in the 1970s disarrayed the rules of memoirs and shaped an iconic, inconsequent form of memoir, a paratactic testimony reviving past experiences in images, flashes, fragments of loss. [*He looks among the books on the bench and fetches a couple.*] For my generation this fragmentary memory, this play of *madeleines*, this compulsion to repeat the experience of missing, has turned into a collective obsession. Ten years ago, Matteo B. Bianchi [*showing a book whose cover sports a childish mountains drawing*] made his own personal "I remember" game – in a book that was first published as a joke and whose popularity surprised him – by collecting the Italian Eighties generational memories. I remember Enzo Tortora; I remember the Vermicino tragedy; I remember the *Altra domenica* TV show; I remember Edwige Fenech, Nadia Cassini, Cicciolina; I remember the "Ti spunta un fiore in bocca" advertisement; I remember Big Babol chewing gums; and

so on and so forth, in a train of possible couplings and swerves. That very "I remember" is the performative of a comforting nostalgia for a time that, let's admit it, was not so bright after all; there were plenty of shadows indeed. We were young is all. Value is only retrospectively added to those very shadows.

[*He stands up, moves into the pool of light, and gets into a more academic attitude.*] In fact, such memory gratification is not exclusive to my own generation, which is the last generation with black & white memories. A hysterical kind of memory agitates today the whole spectrum of generations, including those who, young as they are, never directly experienced what they claim to miss. They miss *somebody else's* past. The bittersweet of nostalgia is a dominant feature of our time, following a dramatic transformation of its very nature. At the end of the seventeenth century [*he collects and browses a book from the pile on the bench*], it was diagnosed at the University of Basel by Johannes Hofer in his 1688 *Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia*, as a "pain of return" (after its Greek etymology, *νόστος* – 'return' – e *ἄλγος*, 'pain'). At the time nostalgia was the condition suffered by Swiss soldiers who had spent time abroad, and lost their homely bonds, so that they would fall ill, and severely so, to the point of dying. They suffered like Brazilian football players, who are in turn their contemporary heirs and the representatives – within the game metaphor – of the heroism, war-like and identity values whose remains still show in their sports uniforms. That form of nostalgia, the one diagnosed by Hofer, just like the one Brazilians suffered from, was reversible. In fact, you could recover from it. You could go back home. Of course, that might not be enough: if a significant amount of time had elapsed, home was no longer there, it was no longer the same. It had been transformed in the very experience of coming back. And the malady lingered on. Now that is nostalgia as missing not so much a *place* as a *time*: childhood, youth, a 'being there' of the past that may only be evoked and regretted. Its matter is photographic in nature, because within its sphere presence is a sign of absence. It is in such form that the nostalgia condition moves from a specific group – the late seventeenth-century soldiers or their late twentieth-century Brazilian heirs – to an entire epoch. Today's nostalgia is no longer to be found as a prerogative of those who miss an authoritarian past. [*He confusedly browses books, then gives up.*] First fascist nostalgia, later 'Ostalgie' in Easter Europe. Today nostalgia pervades fashion, music, television, cinema, advertisement, and emotional marketing: the most diverse sectors of cultural and commodity production. Which is to say, paradoxically, areas whose imperative is novelty. Right now, it's the turn of the Eighties, winking at those who grew up in that decade. Everybody refreshes their post-punk adolescence, new wave signs can be spotted everywhere, shoulder pads get huge again, with mullet haircut on top of them. Today's shoes, suitable to young people and to those who delude themselves into being young again [*he points to his shoes*], are Converse All Star, possibly with fake dirt marks on them, displaying the coolness of poverty, patina without the inconvenience of time, experience without the nuisance of materiality. Smartphone covers look like music tapes; new car models such as Fiat 500 or Mini or the Wolksvagen Beetle (whose ad, back in the 1998, read "If you sold your soul in the Nineteen Eighties, here's your chance to buy it back") evoke models from the Fifties and Sixties boom. We are obsessed with a past that does not pass, by an omnivorous nostalgia. Recent examples may well be TV programs such as *I migliori anni della nostra vita*, or the hyper-nostalgic 2014 edition of the *Sanremo* music festival. Our time is the time of vintage, revival and 'retromania' [*he picks up a bulky white volume sporting a record player on its cover*]: following the mass sampling of the Nineties, our time is marked by remake, reunion, and mash-up aesthetics. Dominated as they are by the language of catastrophe and zombie imagination, the years that started the third millennium do not represent a starting point whatsoever. They just keep calling ghosts back and reviving corpses, mixing up and recombining, serializing, multiplying in a repetition compulsion that extenuates and thwarts creativity.

Significantly, among the technologies that most shaped the new century, drawing spaces and modes of the new 'connected' sociality, those that gave birth to the social network era have a specifically nostalgic matrix. Facebook, to start with. Many first got into it because it promised to let you trace your old school pals, and maybe even – nobody's watching me – delve into the vertigo of possibilities, regretting that ungiven kiss, or smiling for that kiss you *did* give. In Facebook generational groups rooted, say, in

the Seventies or Eighties flourish, enacting identities defined by adolescent experience, and even more, by objects of consumption that shore up a weak as much as fierce sense of belonging. Recently, a quite popular Facebook formula is the "You are from… if…": *You are from* (a certain place) *if* you have done/knew/remember (this or that). It is a practice of geolocation, one that physically locates memory, belonging and so-called 'we sense', and reformulates the principles of authenticity and tradition, combining computer-mediated sociality with the taste, colour and smell of a lost sense of community. The same happens with the other giant of social networks, Instagram: it provides sociality in terms of image filtering, so as to make colours look like the bungled colours of Polaroid snapshots. It is intriguing, by the way, to remark the fact that that Polaroid camera fascinates young people too, i.e., people that never had a chance to use it, and that never had to face the radical economy of time and posing that was required by the dramatically modest number of pictures you could take with it. Unsurprisingly, as a companion to the emotional marketing, to dirty looking sneakers, to scuffed jeans and to vintage looking (but technology hearted) cars, the market has been offering devices that transform your smartphone into a Polaroid snapshot camera, by just adding a microprinter to it. Easily, you can have both state-of-the-art digital technology and the fascinating materiality of bygone times. In other words, you can restore the imperfection of analogic technology, and mimic the excitement of expectation, the frugality-driven renovated intensity of desire.

Today's sociality is a 'retro' sociality, even if it tends to replace the bench [*he turns back and points to the bench, he picks up the tablet and smartphone he had left on it*] with high tech devices that are more and more interconnected with our material and symbolic identity. Such sociality has the taste of immaturity – for the social network is largely a recreational space – and a charming, sepia-tinged past. As if our culture felt its future to be behind its back. Well, not even here is our time radically original. For the origins of such obsession date back to thirty years ago. Nearly forty, in fact. Social historians increasingly tend to identify Eighties as the decade in which time whirls and stops, tasting its end. The symbol of a timeless present may well be the clock of the Bologna Station bombing of 2 August 1980, which was frozen on 10:25, and which still is so, in memory of the suspension of flux represented by the bomb. That clock tells our suspended time, a time in which the future is unthinkable. It is the time that at the end of the Seventies was announced by the Sex Pistols' self-destructive, mocking yell: *No future for you.* Its iconic representation may be found in the 1985 epochal Zemeckis film, *Back to the Future*, providing at once a symptom of and an emblem for such arrested temporality. I'm pretty sure you remember that movie, taking place in the present of 1985, and that you also remember the city square tower clock frozen into a 1955 time, as well as the DeLorean car that 'Doc' Emmett Brown just turned into a time machine, or Marty's skateboard, quilted jacket and camcorder. You might also remember that, in his escape from a terrorist cell, Marty jumps into the DeLorean that was supped to bring him a few minutes ahead in the future; his journey into the future, however, brings him by mistake into the past, to 1955, just before a thunder hit the tower clock, when his parents – two utter failures, lacking all self-esteem and motivation – met. That journey back in time is the occasion to deal with the past, to understand it and to modify it. Marty manages in fact to infuse self-esteem into his mother and father, turning those two wrecks into successful people, a virtual epitome of Eighties imagination: a luxury car parked in the alley, a dynamic life and the pleasures of consumption, Marty's parents thus become accomplices to his adolescence, to his consumerist desires and his first love experiences. All they ask back is for him to grow up just like them, to become *exactly* like them. To arrest time.

Marty's journey to the past (which is to say, in fact, the experience of the future as an elaboration of the past) is in fact a time forgery, faking and modifying its progressive line, its inexorability. The 1985 he travels back to is perfectly adequate to the kind of science fiction the movie belongs to: the new 1985 Marty shapes is a forged, suspended time. In a word, it is a *cosmetic time*. Paradoxically, it is the very acceleration of time – with the urgency to share and update, which we know all too well – is the precondition for time being in arrest. It may not be necessary or even appropriate to recall here Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*), in order to explain such paradox: we are not up to the cultural dignity of that reference. Maybe our animal is far humbler

and more domesticated: our time may well be closer to the Time of the Hamster. The hamster runs its wheel, frenetically and desperately, and the faster it runs – the more it enjoys and updates itself, the more it shows its muscles, socializes, participates, consumes – the more it stays still, entertained and safely confined into its cage. Cosmetic time, the time of hyperkinetic immobility – we may call it 'non-time', after Marc Augé – is the seamless time that lets us evade into an immaturity bubble, and paralyses our gaze in a backwards motion, chaining us up to what Douglas Rushkiff calls 'presentism'. This is the specific kind of nostalgia that permeates our culture. It isn't only a camouflaging of the past removing its traumas. It is not the regret for a lost time in the past, but what it presupposes, in a far more elusive and yet fundamental way: *nostalgia for the future*. It is a form of nostalgia for a time that has not been lived yet, whose richness resides in its unpredictability, in the excited expectation of the shapeless. It is such form of nostalgia that shapes the work of Daft Punk, the 2014 Grammy Award recipient pop group winning the, combining the robotics imagination with Motown sound. As if they were the progeny of the Rockets, Daft Punk stage future in a retro key, in an album whose title (*Random Access Memories*) speaks of the fragmentary, perishable memory of our time. The novelty of the Noughts and Tens sports a retrofuturistic aesthetics, quotation graphics and late Seventies groove (with glamour zombie Nile Rodgers playing guitar on the "Get Lucky" hit single), so as to evoke its own origins, that fundamental phase in which time got twisted upon itself and lost direction.

Between the Seventies and Eighties, a radical crisis and shift – some may well call it 'death' – in science fiction, i.e., the literary genre that in the twentieth century nourished and was fed by the imaginary of exploration, experimentation and discovery. In short, the imaginary of the future. Its funerals were celebrated, one may say, by Steven Spielberg, who in a matter of few years moved from a 1977 film such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, shaped as it is by the frontier epics, to *ET The Extra-Terrestrial*, appearing five years later. We all remember that "Phone Home" ET achingly whispers: ET was a nostalgic alien. His misery made him a contemporary reincarnation of Hofer's soldiers in the late seventeenth century, and an apt emblem for future nostalgia, the epics of a future which is irredeemably and melancholically *passé*. Within five years we had moved from the symbolic economy of exploration, from rockets and spaceships, to the era of the Shuttle, whose peculiarity – it is similar to an airplane, for it takes off and later lands back home – decrees the transformation of our imagination on the future. With the Shuttle, Space becomes domestic. Such is Space, in fact, in Alfonso Cuarón's recent *Gravity* movie (2013), which nostalgically hinges on the fear of breaking off the (umbilical) cord, the gravitational bond with Mother Earth: Space provides the occasion to breath-taking special visual effects, but these seem a matter of astonishment rather than wonder. As if he was acting in a costume drama, George Clooney moves around the Shuttle with a jet pack – the very jet pack that was the new thing thirty years before, in 1984. There is no sign of the wonder guiding Roy Neary's eyes in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*: the Clooney character just *plays*. He passes time. Being a daily experience, Space is domesticated: it is now the setting for a catastrophic movie that our childhood would set in the sea or in the sky. Future is now reduced to a matter of gadgets, devices, games that are envisioned: they do not urge time movement, they do not open up new scenarios, nor point to any frontier. They do not entail conflicts: they are not creative.

Even the exploratory mission of Mars One is fundamentally 'domestic' in nature. Mars One is a project of human mission to Mars finding its reason and funding in the talent show TV format. Everything, from astronauts' selection to 'marsing' and colonisation, is planned to be filmed and used as material for a TV program: this program will be the economic engine of the whole thing. The participants to this one-way journey – no return is possible, from its very beginning this mission is marked by loss and nostalgia – will be chosen by the audience, and so on. Which virtually equals saying that in the new century Mars, literature, cooking and music are, after all, all different faces of a single, great TV show. *Live, right now*. Ladies and gentlemen, here I give you Space at home. In other words, maybe the cosmetic time we live in really closes not only the twentieth century – the century of science fiction, Progress and the Future – but the whole Modernity project, blocking its symbol, the clock, and the utopia of understanding time, of preserving the past as well as anticipating the future.

This is what today's nostalgic obsession reveals: the regret for a lost ability to project ourselves into the future. We are incapable of thinking the future unless in retrospect. We can foretell some technology, yes, according to what happens in *Back to the Future II*, the film sequel set in 2015 – which is to say, today. Smart fridges telling you when you run out of produce, or smart shoes that lace themselves up, or a floating skate, and so on. That film stated it loud and clear: we do not lack novelties. We lack vision, perspective, the desire to meet and tame the unexpected.

Yes, you are right: of course, one can claim that the future is omnipresent. Everybody invokes its necessity and claim to be its best exegetist. We are obsessed by risk and prevention, surveillance and control of public spaces, including benches [*he looks behind his shoulders*]. This is a way to stage the future too, at least as much as forecasts are. Of course. And yet. On the one side these practices are remnants of the twentieth century. Think of Futures Studies, a discipline which started as a post-WWII attempt at anticipating post-atomic scenarios and have increasingly transformed into a marketing branch: self-lacing shoes, missing milk-ordering fridges and the like are soon to reach our homes. Yes, indeed. On the other hand, such futures paint a frightful picture, one that we cannot bring form and intelligibility to. In other words, the intensity of our claiming the future is an index of the extent to which we miss the future, which no longer holds any promise to radically change our experience of the world. Thinking the future in the shape of a smart fridge, or buying insurance policies and installing video surveillance systems everywhere, are different ways to bind, limit, stake a claim on a future whose shapeless nature is helplessly scaring.

In order to think our current condition, it may be useful to go back to the early twentieth century, when time accelerated and the future, so to speak, exploded. It's a story told in Stephen Kern's 1983 book, by now a classic of cultural criticism. [*He picks up a bulky pink and red volume, and starts looking for a specific page.*] In the early twentieth century intellectuals like Eugène Minkowski and H.G. Wells theorised an *active* and a *passive* mode to face the future. The former implies the fact of actually facing it, confronting and controlling it; the latter means awaiting, fearing, letting it hit us. Clearly, the human experience of time is a mixture of both modes. There are specific times and conditions, however, when the mixture gets unbalanced. The experience of WWI, for instance, placed soldiers in trenches along the defence line, in a static position of total, unconditioned awaiting. They did not control the future in any way. And that radically passive experience was as devastating as enemy attacks.

Well. One hundred years later, we are immersed in a condition that is surprisingly similar to the one experienced by those soldiers. Our war is no longer fought in actual trenches, that's for sure. It's a war with no certain boundaries and enemies, as well as devoid of any heroic rhetoric. In the cultural economy of the Global War, in the age of infinite terrorism, the enemy has lost his recognisable face and identity. Peace routines and war exceptionality seem to blend. And our civil existence seems to have taken up some of the features of a trench war, albeit without any clear frontlines and any recognisable enemy. And if we recall that nostalgia, the painful longing for a home that cannot be returned to, was born as a soldier pathology, we may understand why nostalgia itself has turned into an epochal condition, and why it has done so with respect to the future, missing an enchanted gaze toward the as-yet-unknown that would be apparently moulded in our hands.

Just like *Gravity*, or *Back to the Future*, or *ET The Extra-Terrestrial* narrate, our uncanny condition is disorientation. We cannot imagine and cognitively dominate the future because we have lost the coordinates of the present, and we live in exile. We barely acknowledge the present as our time – and this happens not only to the elderly, or to those who (like myself) are no longer in their youth, and progressively feel like their time is slipping away. Young people experience precariousness as a living condition, too, and do not feel 'in tempo' in the world they inhabit. There you are: we no longer feel 'at home' here. Maybe we are facing the end of a paradigm; definitely, we are facing an epistemic crisis: the languages and cognitive tools that we employed to make sense of the world no longer work. Surely, easily advertised innovation or the urge to start up and get things done won't be enough. Doing things does not equal setting the clock back into movement again. If we want to 'go home again' we must rearticulate the relationship

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between ourselves and the world. Nothing shorter than that. If the tenets of Modernity are in irreversible crisis, we must invent a new language that is not superficially creative, finding new sense to our being-in-the-world and to our being-in-time. As we can see in *Gravity*'s best worth – the metaphor of the umbilical cord dominating the film poster and its logline, "Don't let go" – there is only one thing that is worse than losing one's home: it is living in the regret of the missed home. Resisting to accept one's time, to place oneself in the line of Time, in a direction that generates sense, meaningfulness, shape and design [*he points to the capital D in TED, 'Technology Education Design'*]. For the 'design' we are talking about is not simply a matter of interior architecture: it is the design for a living, the project, vision, ability and willingness to take responsibility for the future. We must, in other words, look for a new familiarity with reality, accepting that our new 'home' – our value and linguistic universe, our sense-making apparatuses – may not be the home we knew. [*He picks up the teddy bear*.] It should be different, in fact, so that it may accommodate those after us – our kids, our students – as they refuse our world, and bid our ghosts farewell. Maybe they will manage in doing what seems impossible to us right now. Maybe they will fix the clock and set time in movement again: maybe they will reconceive reality, regenerate it. Moving from *re-make* as recreation and entertainment to *re-generation* and the creative sparkle. Abandoning the hamster's cage, displacing the web and plot of the eternal present. It may be well worth it, and not necessarily for the nobler of intentions. Honestly: are we not tempted to escape the prison of the present – if only, out of curiosity, just to see how it ends?

On the words and music of Blur's "Out of Time", as in the theatre all lights are turned off, the man collects his things and sits on the bench, awaiting.

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