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**Just Doing It.
The Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real in Nike's Commodity Fetish**

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The Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real in Nike's Commodity Fetish*

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[First of all, we need to ask a very important question: How do you pronounce Nike: is it Nike or Nike? There seems to be some confusion about this; or, rather, there seems to be a lack right at the heart of Nike. Most people don't seem to know how to pronounce the name 'properly'.]

Since the mid-1990s Nike has been in the 'bad books' of left-leaning and ethically concerned commentators, anti-capitalist movements and other protesters and academics alike because of its production practices in 'third world' sweatshops, paying workers very little money and generally providing poor working conditions, while charging extortionate prices for their fashionable trainers in their own NikeTown branding temples or the millions of other shopping outlets where Nike products are on sale. "If a pair of Nike Air Jordans (are) retailed for \$130", it is asked, "but cost a fraction of that to make, aren't they overpriced? Where does the rest of the money go?" (Bullert, 1999: 5). The term 'sweatshop' was at some stage so tightly connected to the brand Nike, that it was entirely conceivable that this huge, now 30 billion Dollars worth, company could be brought to its knees. It wasn't to be. Despite a worldwide campaign against Nike (and other sweatshop operating multinationals like Adidas and Reebok), the company responded by introducing 'strict' codes of conducts for outsourcing factories, which, it was hoped, would address at least the more serious allegations of terrible sweatshop working conditions and child labour in many of their so-called 'third world' outsourcing factories in Indonesia, Vietnam, China, Taiwan and elsewhere. Although at first slow to respond to the massive anti-sweatshop campaign, Nike has since learned its lesson, and it can now proudly say that it takes its 'responsibility' very seriously – at least the company says so on its sleek website <http://nikeresponsibility.com> (note that NikeResponsibility itself seems to have become a brand).

But this paper is not proposing to revisit 'old news'. Rather, the starting point for our investigation is our claim that part of the failure – and we would want to call it a failure – of the anti-sweatshop campaign was its inability to conceptualize and understand the concrete workings of the Nike commodity. And to be sure, this failure is ongoing. Recently, War on Want, a UK-based activist charity that is playing a very active part in exposing the malpractices of multinational companies in the 'third world', has been running a campaign called 'Let's clean up Fashion' to fight against low-price fashion items sold by UK chains such as ASDA, Primark, Tesco, and others, by exposing the working practices under which this fashion is produced. While we very much support this campaign in general, we fear that it doesn't go far enough. For us, the underlying principle of such campaigns is that of 'corporate social responsibility'; that is, multinationals like Nike are called upon to pay workers a 'fair wage for a fair days' work', the traditional slogan of union activism for over a century. The novelty of the anti-sweat campaign is that it isn't fought primarily by labour unions, but by a wide array of civil society groups largely operating at the level of consumption and culture, rather than production (for more on this, see Spicer and Böhm, 2007, as well as Böhm et al., 2008). So, in our view, the anti-sweat campaign isn't so different from other, more traditional campaigns fought by unions. The main aim is to improve working conditions and wages, as the profits made by multinationals are seen to be excessive in comparison to what they pay to the Vietnamese or other Asian workers producing Nike trainers or other commodities.

To be sure, campaigns like this are well intended – they appeal to consumers' hearts and minds, to their ethical compassion – but what they do not manage to do is to put forward a rigorous analysis and

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critique of how the commodity fetish works, and how it could be disrupted. In our view, only a rupture of the workings of the commodity fetish – perhaps we could call it ‘the act’ – would achieve real improvements. Žižek (1997) might actually go further and say that it is campaigns like these that are actually the kernel of today’s ideological cover up. That is, the anti-sweatshop campaign is not fighting the commodity fetish, but enabling it to continue its destructive work precisely through its work of ‘transparency’. But we are jumping ahead of ourselves.

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So, what exactly is the Nike commodity fetish? As Žižek rightly points out in his Parallax book, most people would probably start off by lamenting the fact that for Nike the most important thing is its brand, one of the most recognised in the world. Nike, in their minds, is not more than a huge marketing and design agency, a perfect example of the so-called new knowledge economy that sees Western knowledge workers (designers, marketers, advertisers, web and communication specialists, etc) primarily producing an immaterial product, the Nike brand, while the actual trainers are produced far away in Latin American or Asian countries. Nike doesn’t even own its production sites; it has outsourced most of the production of its commodities to third parties, which are wholly responsible for delivering the finished product. So, Nike has only limited influence over how these shoes are manufactured. It publishes production tenders for various shoe ranges, and the independent production factories fall over each other to secure the rights to produce them. These tenders are of course primarily won on price: the cheaper you can produce a trainer and ship it to Europe or North America, the more likely Nike selects you. And most of these production contracts are of course short-term, so that you are kept on your toes in terms of ensuring ‘quality control’ and continuous ‘price leadership’ – or whatever the buzzwords are in the trade these days. So, it is easy to see the downward price spiral at the far and receiving end of which is the teenage boy or woman worker receiving a few cent for sowing a Nike football or pair of trainers.

One of the popular leftfield responses to this exploitative outsourcing model – which is the backbone of today’s global economy, where the production of branded goods is mainly happening in low cost ‘developing countries’, whereas their consumption primarily takes place in the richer ‘developed’ world – is to call for this production to be brought back ‘home’. That is, multinationals like Nike are criticized for just running a virtual operation in the US, concentrating on the re-production of its design and branding. It is a response that would also lament the fact that the West doesn’t add up to much more than an ‘experience economy’, as Gilmore calls – a kind of big Disneyland. Or as Peter complains: “Some [Nike] ads don’t even mention the company’s name, featuring instead only the swoosh logo” (2008: 99). Perfect virtuality. And in many commentators’ view, this is an insane state to be in: it is very dangerous, they argue, that the West doesn’t produce anything anymore – it is not enough to just sell service add-ons to the products that are actually produced in China and other emerging countries. Here, we would argue, the fetish is misrecognised for the brand. That is, Nike’s famous swoosh, and the fact that this is what the Nike company mainly seems to be producing – an experience, a fashion, a branded service – is seen to be the problem, and the assumption with this kind of response is that if only we attract more ‘real economy’ (like ship building, car manufacturing – real ‘get your hands dirty’ kind of jobs) companies, which pay the workers decent wages and pensions, then things would be better; or to put it differently: people wouldn’t misperceive Nike’s commodity-fetish-brand as the real thing anymore. It’s the branding, in other words, that is the problem. The experience and service economy has become too dominating, it is argued in certain political corners – left and right actually. Everything is only image these days, not enough substance – as some politicians are eager to lament. In our view, though, this misses the point of the commodity fetish completely.

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As far as we are aware, Lacan never talked directly about commodity fetishism, which was a term introduced by Marx in the first volume of *Das Kapital*. But in his 1955 lecture ‘The Freudian Thing, or

the meaning of the return to Freud in psychoanalysis' Lacan curiously talks a lot about a 'desk' – which presumably is just the desk in the lecture hall where he's giving his lecture. But we are let to believe that he actually had Marx's 'table' in mind that features so prominently in his analysis of commodity fetishism. At first sight, Marx writes, a 'normal' wooden table is

an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will (1976: 163).

The point of Marx's dancing table is to show how an ordinary thing, the table, acquires an extra-sensuousness once it has been turned into a commodity. Marx's aesthetics of the commodity, however, is not something that is up to the subject, consumer or audience to interpret; the commodity's beauty is an objectivity that is grounded in the very way the symbolic order is shaped under capitalism. As the commodity conceals social relations of production to make them appear as relations between things, the commodity is aestheticised, it acquires a sublime aura of objectivity. The table makes all sorts of wild dances not because someone subjectively imagines such a 'grotesque idea'. Instead, such grotesqueness, one could argue, is structurally embedded in the way social reality works itself.

This very configuration Marx sees as what he calls a 'reversed relationship' (1844: 7); a relationship – which, instead of man's activity being free activity, as it should be by laws of nature – is now an 'estranged relationship' between the worker and non-worker (or should we say consumer) and between workers and their products (*ibid.*). As Marx says in his 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, the relationship between the worker and the non-worker is that of exploitation and that between herself and her product is that of her own product becoming alien to herself (Marx, 1844: 6). To quote Marx directly: "the more civilized the object, the more barbarous the worker" (1844: 4), implying that the more we put into the aesthetics of a commodity, the more of ourselves we lose.

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Qua Lacan, perhaps, we should rephrase what we have just said: it is not us who lose ourselves – as if there was a base identity that we could somehow just lose. Instead, we, as 'Is' and 'Egos' of the global, neo-liberal experience society, only exist the way we do because of our varying identifications with brand images like that of 'the swoosh', or millionaire star athletes and Olympians that are on the payroll of the Nike company. As Penezola says: "This sense of being a part of a spectacle via resonance and identification was what consumers were 'just doing' more than anything else at Nike Town" (1998: 380), the company's temple of consumption and sporty achievement, where consumers can be enthralled by the phantasmagoric fantasy of sporting achievement, success and progress. Michael Taussig sees this as a "socially necessary fiction", which, in his view, is "a commonplace that underlies the fictional naturalness of identities on which...society depends and that guarantees its concept of objects and objectivity" (1980: 26). Without this fantasy, without this necessary phantasmagoria, consumers might not do their duties of consuming and keeping the economy going. As George W. Bush told his subjects after 9/11; 'the most patriotic thing you as an American citizen can do now, is to go and shop'. The fantasy of a secure society, of an economy that will never fail, of everlasting progress, can only be maintained, it seems, through the identification of the masses with the commodity, with an extreme consumer culture based largely on credit, fictional money. There is a lot of responsibility resting on the shoulders of a teenager fancying Jordan's Nike jump starters. Or, as Billig says: "If the commodities are to be consumed as items of pleasure and as conformations of identity of the consumer, then the consumer must routinely not think about the labour relations involved in the production of what they are consuming. This means forgetting about the social relations which lie behind the commodities" (1999: 318).

The way Billig expresses this as an active and almost purposeful forgetting would not be, presumably, Lacan's choice. Instead, he would see the consumer's purchasing act – similarly to Marx – as something that objectively and necessarily involves a social, that is, structural forgetting. Going back to his lecture 'The Freudian thing', in which he talks frequently about a desk, or a table, Lacan says:

For this table, no less than the ego, is dependent on the signifier, namely on the word, which, bearing its function to the general, to the lectern of quarrelsome memory and to the Tronchin piece of noble pedigree, is responsible for the fact that it is not merely a piece of wood, worked in turn by the woodcutter, the joiner and the cabinet-maker, for reasons of commerce, combined with fashion, itself productive of needs that sustain its exchange value, providing it is not led too quickly to satisfy the least superfluous of those needs by the last use to which it will eventually be put, namely, as firewood....Furthermore, the significations to which the table refers are in no way less dignified than those of the ego, and the proof is that on occasion they envelop the ego itself. (1977: 132, translation modified)

This is precisely where Lacan and Marx meet. When Marx talks about an extra-sensuousness that endows the commodity, then Lacan would talk about the symbolic order, the Other, the chain of language signifiers that attach themselves to ordinary things like tables to make them into what they are: tables in thousands of different guises and contexts. In the same way Lacan sees the ego, the I, becoming a subject only through the symbolic order, the Other.

* * *

The first thing to realise about Lacan's conception of the subject is that, in his view, we live in what he calls the "historical era of the 'ego'" (1977: 71); the American era in which the ego is elevated into an autonomous individual who can do things at will. Let's quote Lacan directly:

One understands that in order to prop up so obviously precarious a conception certain individuals on the other side of the Atlantic should have felt the need to introduce into it some stable value, some standard of the measure of the real: this turns out to be the autonomous *ego*. This is the supposedly organized ensemble of the most disparate functions that lend their support to the subject's feeling of innateness. It is regarded as autonomous because it appears to be sheltered from the conflicts of the person ... A team of *egos* no doubt less equal than autonomous ... is offered to the Americans to guide them towards *happiness*, without upsetting the autonomies, egoistical or otherwise, that pave with their non-conflictual spheres the *American way* of getting there. (1977: 231)

So, in a way, when Bush addresses the American people after 9/11, he addresses them as egos: the ego of the consumer, the ego of the American citizen, the ego of the world's policeman – the imagined autonomous ego in charge of history. This, as Teresa Brennan points out, is, of course, a deeply ahistorical understanding of the subject. As she says:

The ego is opposed to any historical understanding, including if not especially the understanding of its own course. It is also opposed to the history of anything different from itself. It is interested in difference only in so far as everything different from it provides it with a mirror for itself. In this respect, it will reduce all difference to sameness. (1993: 37)

"It is clear", to quote Lacan again, "that the promotion of the ego today culminates, in conformity with the utilitarian conception of man that reinforces it, in an ever more advanced realization of man as individual, that is to say, in an isolation of the soul ever more akin to its original dereliction" (1977: 27). In Lacan's view, the origin of this historical misunderstanding is embedded in what he calls the 'mirror stage', which is "generic to man, from which results at the time indicated the jubilant identification of the as yet *infans* individual with the total form in which this reflexion of the nose is integrated, namely,

the image of his body” (1977: 137-138). That is, the Real of un-determination, of non-coordination, of non-identification is overcome by the act of the little six months old child starting to recognise itself in the mirror, which can be either a real, physical mirror, or the parents who go ‘Agoo, agoo, hushigoo, hushigoo’, and the child replies ‘agoo, agoo, hushigoo, hushigoo’. As Lacan says, “the child begins to become engaged in the system of the concrete discourse of the environment, by reproducing more or less approximately in his *Fort!* And in his *Da!* The vocables that he receives from it. *Fort! Da!* It is precisely in his solitude that the desire of the little child has already become the desire of another, of an alter ego who dominates him and whose object of desire is henceforth his own affliction” (1977: 103-104). This is, according to Lacan, the start of the alienation of the subject, the identification with an other that determines the I. At about 18 months the mirror stage comes to its end; it is a time that

inaugurates, by the identification with the imago of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy..., the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations. It is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the I into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, even though it should correspond to a natural maturation – the very normalization of this maturation being henceforth dependent, in man, on a cultural mediation as exemplified, in the case of the sexual object, by the Oedipus complex. (Lacan, 1977: 5-6)

That is, for Lacan the I, the ego, the subject, is not transparent – this transparency is what he calls ahistorical, i.e. a contingent, deception “at the expense of the opacity of the signifier that determines the I” (1977: 307). In other words, what is at the heart of the I, the subject, is the image, which brings us back to fetishism.

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In 1956 Lacan published – together with Wladimir Granoff – a paper called ‘Fetishism: The Symbolic, the Imaginary and the Real’ (Lacan and Granoff, 1956), which is a commentary on, and perhaps a reinterpretation of, Freud’s classical essay equally called ‘Fetishism’. According to Freud, fetishism is triggered by a trauma, the trauma that the mother lacks a penis. This lack, according to Freud, is compensated by some other object, a symbolic substitute for the penis, an object that is invested with excessive energies. Thus, in the mind of the fetishist, quoting Freud

the woman has a penis, in spite of everything; but this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, as it were, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor. But this interest suffers an extraordinary increase as well, because the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute... We can now see what the fetish achieves and what it is that maintains it. It remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it. (1927: 353)

In other words, fetishism is triggered by a fear of castration that leads to the substitution of a sexual object with an Other. This substitution occurs because the Other is lacking something (a sexual object, the penis). Therefore, the subject’s attempt to fully identify with the Mother, the Other, is failing. Fantasy tries to fill this lack of the Other; it tries to provide a solution for the uncertainty that is produced by the gap between the subject’s need for identity and the failing of the Other to provide this ‘full’ identity. Fantasy thus reduces anxiety and creates something like a harmonious picture which enables the subject to live without fear; it helps to obfuscate the true horror of reality (e.g. castration).

Obviously, there are a wide range of feminist critiques of the language Freud uses in his analysis of fetishism. For Elisabeth Grosz (1990), for examples, amongst other feminists, the language of fetishism

reinscribes patriarchal narratives of phallic domination; that is, it re-emphasises the phallus as THE male anatomy that dominates societal imagination.

Nevertheless, we feel that Freud does describe an important process of symbolic substitution carried out in times of fear and anxiety. And can we not say that our attachment – even enjoyment – of the commodity, our, as some people would call it, psychotic celebration of individual property, of consumer culture, based on an imaginary wealth produced by credit cards and debt, is the process of social substitution that Marx had in mind when he wrote his celebrated passages on commodity fetishism? And one historical connection has to be made here: In what Lacan calls ‘the era of the ego’ this substitution is pathological; that is, not being able to let go of the mother’s phallus is a reflection of our own narcissism; our own fear and anxiety of castration (Freud, 1927: 162). As Freud points out, this anxiety is a repression of a truth, the lack of the woman’s penis. It is this repression itself that is responsible for the genesis of neurosis (Freud, 2003). Being the precondition for the construction of symptoms, we understand that the fetishist’s symptoms are thus a “substitute for something that it held back by repression” (Freud, 2003: 343). All symptoms serve the intention of sexual satisfaction that the neurotic lacks in her life. But, according to Freud (1927), the fetishist displays the existence of both neurosis and psychosis. This ambivalence is evident in the way he treats the object; on one hand, it is her object of desire and he worships it surrendering to reality (Freud, 1927); on the other, he mistreats and abuses it as a disregard of reality (Freud, 2003). The two contradictory actions result, according to Freud, in reinitiating his sexual wishes instead of satisfying them, so she finds herself in the vicious circle of narcissistic fetishism. And is this not vividly visible in the commodity fetishist who both worships the commodity and can’t get enough of it, finding herself in a never ending web of consumption, while also mistreating those commodities already in his possession, never finding complete satisfaction in it. ‘Retail therapy’, as it is called in popular language, can never fully satisfy you; you always have to do more for an instant gratification that almost instantly wears off again. This is the carousel of commodity production and consumption (Böhm, 2006).

* * *

When one reads Nike’s advertising slogans, like ‘heroes are people who believe they can do it’ or ‘on the field there are no winners; only survivors,’ they reactivate the infant’s mirror stage of narcissism, the stage where there was faith in the existence of the mother’s phallus, that stage where there was no fear of castration. Finding meaning and purpose in Nike’s slogans, for the consumer the purchase of the trainer gets unconsciously interwoven with being the winner, the survivor, the hero. Freud points out that libidinal energy has the stubborn, unchangeable character of being attracted to these narcissistic points of satiation (Freud, 2003: 413). It reverts to points of fixation in infancy and escapes to find them in different ways.

‘The winner’, ‘the survivor’, ‘the hero’ – these are all symbolic images, which, for Lacan and Granoff (1956), are at the heart of fetishistic behaviour. They write in their essay ‘Fetishism’: “We would say, then, that behavior can be called imaginary when its direction to an image, and its own value as an image for another person, renders it displaceable out of the cycle within which a natural need is satisfied” (1956: 272). Language is thus transferred to an image. While this transfer is, according to Lacan, part and parcel of what it means to be a subject, there are at least three possibilities of the outcome of such displacement. Lacan and Granoff write, commenting on Freud’s psychoanalytic case of Harry who has developed a fetishism of ‘shiny noses’:

The entire clinical history of Harry's case turns upon this point. Will the fear of castration thrust him into anxiety? Or will it be faced and symbolized as such in the Oedipal dialectic? Or will the movement rather be frozen in the permanent memorial which, as Freud puts it, fear will build for itself? To stress the point: if the strength of the repression (of the affect) is to be found in the interest for the successor of the feminine phallus, it is the denegation of its absence which will

have constructed the memorial. The fetish will become the vehicle both of denying and asseverating the castration. (1956: 304)

So, these are the options, according to Lacan and Granoff: anxiety, Oedipus, and the memorial. Let's briefly look at each of these outcomes in turn. About anxiety, Lacan and Granoff say:

Anxiety, as we know, is always connected with a loss – i.e., a transformation of the ego – with a two-sided relation on the point of fading away to be superseded by something else, something which the patient cannot face without vertigo. This is the realm and the nature of anxiety. As soon as a third person is introduced into the narcissistic relationship, there arises the possibility of real mediation, through the intermediary, of the transcendent personage, that is to say, of someone through whom one's desire and its accomplishment can be symbolically realized. At this moment, another register appears, that of law – in other words, of guilt. (1956: 273)

Here Lacan and Ganoff position fetishism between imaginary anxiety and symbolic guilt. An imaginary relationship is always two-sided (*ibid.*), between the I and its mirror, whereas for a symbolic guilt relationship to emerge there has to be a third person (*ibid.*); the Name-of-the-Father, the law, the symbolic Other, the social order: 'this is how we do things around here'. The commodity relationship is arguably right at the centre of today's guilt complexes. This starts with the fancy car the next door neighbour possesses, and ends with the neo-liberal economism at the heart of all government action today. Once you create intense competition between workers, companies, regions, and even countries, then you artificially create lacks and absences that continuously have to be filled. As Böhm and Brei (2008) argue in a recent paper, marketing is at the heart of this lack. There is no desire without lack, according to Lacan. Marketing – including political and social marketing as well as public relations – continuously has to create artificial lacks and absences in order to create new desires aimed at filling them. The Ground Zero of the hole where the Twin Towers used to stand are therefore the perfect marketing plot to create new consumption: whether this is the American consumer who is urged by Bush to spend as if there was no tomorrow, or the President gives away billions worth of tax credits to the already well-off, or he spends literally trillions on new weapon systems to be tested in other places of lack: Iraq and others in the 'axis of evil'.

While there is probably little we have to say about the Oedipus complex, perhaps we could briefly look at the third optional outcome: what Lacan and Granoff (1956: 304) call the 'permanent memorial'. This is what the fetishist could build in memory of the loss of the mother's phallus. It is an absence that needs to be filled with a stable object to commemorate the gap, the lack, the absence and loss experienced by the mother. Whereas the traditional – anthropological – usage of the term fetishism was mainly targeted at the totems and other memorials used by indigenous people mainly in Africa to represent, for example, the dead, or other absent others, today the commodity often is used to build such memorials. Here we are not just talking about the obvious temples of consumer capitalism – the shopping malls, the office skyscrapers, etc – around we dance to celebrate our so-called freedom and ever lasting economic and societal progress. Beyond that, as Teresa Brennan (1993) interestingly points out in her book *History After Lacan*, the commodity itself can be seen as a 'frozen image'; an image that is both speedy and still. That is, the commodity has to be continuously on the move, in order to produce surplus value for the capitalist (Böhm, 2006). On the other hand, though, that very speed implies the ever increasing reduction in time that describes commodity exchange. We could name here just-in-time systems that are at the heart of the outsourcing model used by Nike and most other multinational companies. Or take the internet: at the touch of a button commodity exchanges and relations of all kinds can be realised within seconds. The commodity itself has become the memorial, the totem, around which we dance – not just in the trading rooms of the City, but also in our daily lives. Today, all too often we can literally not imagine a different life without commodity relations, with all the implications outlined above when we introduced this paper and Nike's case of sweatshop production and consumption in particular.

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So, how does psychoanalysis deal with this pathology of commodity fetishism? Freud says: “Our therapy works by transforming what is unconscious into what is conscious, and it works only in so far as it is in a position to affect that transformation” (Freud, 2003: 323). Thus, whatever is pathogenically unconscious is removed by filling in the “gaps in patient’s memory, to remove his amnesia” (Freud, 2003: 326). The anti-sweatshop and other resistance campaigns, too, aim to remove our amnesia, and implant our memory with those missing images that commodity fetishism deletes from the scene of the phantasmagoria of high-street fashion culture. Resistance’s first task is, one could say, to show those dialectical images that force a new consciousness in the subject about its own fantasmatic existence. Hence, the point of resistance is to provide access to the Real – that which cannot be symbolised. Accessing the Real is a resistance to the Other, in Žižek’s (1997) view; a kind of an act of uncovering the ‘dirty underbelly’ of the commodity fetish. To be sure, resistance is not a purely conscious choice made by the fully intentional individual. Resistance should rather be seen as an objective act that discloses the structural impossibility of the Other. The Other has a structural lack built into it, as the Other can never fully determine the subject. That is, the commodity-Other and the fetishism that determines today’s consumer society can never fully construct the ‘perfect consumer’. There is always an excess to consumption that even the Nike marketing machinery cannot control – just think of Adbusters and other ways of ‘defacing’ advertising images, exposing the sickness at the heart of the commodity world.

So, has the anti-sweatshop campaign achieved anything? Yes, and no! Yes, because it has brought to our attention the difficult working conditions, the exploitation and dehumanisation that is part and parcel of the global economy. Many, particularly young people – because this campaign was particularly supported amongst college students – have become aware of the images that are suppressed by the Nike marketing machine. In this way, the campaign has helped to politicise consumption, to put Nike and other multinationals and their production practices on the spot. However, about a decade after the heights of the anti-sweatshop campaign, we also need to be realistic about what it has really changed. In our minds, not very much. Today, Nike is worth many more billions more than a decade ago. Multinationals continue to exploit third world workers, paying them mediocre wages; consumption is still seen as the primary way to keep the economies of the West going. In other words, the world is quite happily ticking on, the way it has for quite a while. What we would like to tentatively suggest here is that the anti-sweatshop campaign has actually been part of the maintenance of the normal ‘goings-on’ of consumer capitalism. How is this?

A known symptom of obsessional neurosis is, according to Freud, the patient’s ability to “make displacements, and exchanges, he can replace one foolish idea by another somewhat milder, he can proceed from one precaution to prohibition to another, instead of one ceremonial he can perform another. He can displace the obsession but not remove it” (Freud, 2003: 300). In other words, one fetishistic obsession with a particular brand can be easily replaced by another. So, the Nike brand can be replaced by Adidas or Reebok. Or, even within the Nike empire, different kinds of products can be offered, luring those customers who have become dissatisfied with the mainstream brand back into the Nike family. Or, as has actually happened in Nike’s case, new codes of conducts and a corporate social responsibility campaign can be launched, in order to supplement existing marketing messages with an ethical twist that directly takes the wind out of the sails of the anti-sweatshop campaign without really changing the fundamental outsourcing model the company is based on.

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This is precisely the thing – *das Ding* – which interests Žižek (1997) in his book, *The Plague of Fantasies*. There he puts forward the notion that precisely the ‘defacing’ of the commodity relationship, the uncovering of the falseness of the commodity fetish, is the process of maintaining the very fantasy of consumer capitalism. Žižek (1997: 102) uses the example of the so-called ‘the making of...’ films or ‘fly

on the wall' documentaries on TV that are supposed to reveal to us how 'real' life behind the 'official' camera looks like. They give us the impression of being able to have full access to the organisation of social relations. That is, by showing us how a film is made, or how work in easyJet or other companies is really like, they lure us into the belief to having a transparent picture of reality. Žižek uses this example to make the point that today's ideological process does not only work by fetishising the (magical) object itself – for example, the commodity that is advertised – but also by what Taussig (1999) calls 'defacing' the magical object, by opening the 'black box' and showing the secrets behind the beautiful façade of things.

Another example Žižek (1997: 127ff) uses is the Internet. He asks: is our shiny new electronic world of the Internet and mobile phone culture not based on a similar fetishism of transparency? Today we are made to believe that the Other is just a computer mouse click away: the Internet gives us access to all secrets of the world, mobile phones enable us to communicate everywhere with anybody – this, at least, seems to be the talk. Whatever used to be unreachable, unbridgeable, and unimaginable – our shiny new cyberworld seems to have the answer. Žižek thus asks: is not this New Age celebration of cyberspace an important new face of commodity fetishism, a fetishism that does not work by concealing relations but by supposedly making them transparent?

In a similar way, the anti-sweatshop campaign gives us the impression of full transparency. We can now see images of children sowing together Nike footballs and receiving a few cents for their work. The subject is supposed to know and she does know. As Žižek says, today we are very aware of how unethical capitalism is, how dehumanising work is, how commodities are really produced. But all this knowledge, he says, doesn't prevent us from continuing shopping. So, going back to Billig's above-cited point that, "if the commodities are to be consumed as items of pleasure and as conformations of identity of the consumer, then the consumer must routinely not think about the labour relations involved in the production of what they are consuming" (1999: 318), Žižek would say that this misses the point. In Žižek's view, knowing the relations of commodity production doesn't change anything. In fact, the transparency of the commodity fetish can support the functioning of that very fetish relationship. But, how does this work?

In Žižek's (1997) view, fetishism emerges precisely at the intersection of the two lacks: the subject's own lack, and the lack of the Other. This means that the fetish both exposes the mal-functioning of the symbolic order, while, at the same time, filling the new gap by a substituted attachment. In the same way, the anti-sweatshop act is the attempt of 'defacing' the fetish Other, to expose the 'dirty underbelly' of the symbolic universe of NikeTown. At the same time, though, the structures of capitalism introduce a vehicle to fill the gap, which in this case is called NikeResponsibility, the new brand of the Nike, which is basically exactly the old Nike brand plus a supplement.

In this same way we should see today's ethical and green consumption trend that sees itself as a resistance to the established world of traditional consumer capitalism. One system of consumption is opened up, and is quickly replaced by another signifying chain, now emphasising ethics, responsibility, environmentally and ecologically friendly commodities. We are suddenly all organic. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2006) show in detail in their book, *The Spirit of Capitalism*, one era of resistance is used by capitalism to reproduce itself along new lines. The language of the resistance movements of the 1960s is used today to legitimise today's capitalist relations, emphasising individuality, creativity and constant change. But how much has really changed? We are still talking about commodity relations, whether there is an ethical responsibility batch attached to it or not.

So, summarising, we can say that the commodity fetish seems to be very much dialectically related and therefore dependent on a constant process of self-defacing, a process of self-critique. What appears to be an act of the Real, is quickly brought into the fold of the hegemonic-symbolic world. To be clear, today's so-called transparent commodity relations, which give us an impression of knowing exactly the production of global commodity chains, and the exploitation and alienation at the heart of capitalist

relations, fulfil the function of maintaining a distance to the terror of the Real, and provide opportunities for new accumulation rounds of capital.

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