

GUEST AUTHOR

# Pink is the New Red

## *Neo Yokio* as an Expression of Millennial Marxism

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**Srećko Jurišić**

*Buttercup:*

You mock my pain.

*Westley:*

Life is pain, Highness. Anyone who  
says differently is selling something.

*Princess Bride* (1987)

I'd love to speak with Leonard  
He's a sportsman and a shepherd  
He's a lazy bastard  
Living in a suit.  
Leonard Cohen, *Going Home, Old Ideas* (2012)

### 1.

It is a well-known fact that Karl Marx quotes from Dante in his *Preface to Capital*. Some even argue, as for example William Clare Colbert in his argute *Marx's Inferno*, that the entire *magnum opus* by Marx should be read as a catabasis or that “Marx composed *Capital* as a modern, secular *Inferno*”,<sup>1</sup> even Fredric Jameson calls *Capital* an “infernally machine”.<sup>2</sup> It is also known that in that closing quotation Marx does not quote Dante *ad litteram*, he essentially adapts the Florentine’s verse. Instead of Dante’s “Vien dietro a me, e lascia dir le genti” (Purgatorio V, 13) we find “Segui il tuo corso, e lascia dir le genti”.<sup>3</sup> The Latin *adaptare* is applied literally here in its sense of fitting in. Marx calls it “my maxim” and adapts it into his work eliminating the *dux* component of Virgil and leaving the expression more open with “tuo” instead of “a me”. His adaptation seems to be suggesting the exegetical path the entire twentieth century took in reinterpreting, revisiting and reappropriating philosopher’s ideas. Adaptation is, of course, also “a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and

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**1** William Clare Colbert, *Marx's Inferno. Political Theory of Capital*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 21.

**2** Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital. A Commentary on Volume One*, London-New York, Verso, 2014, p. 47.

**3** Karl Marx, *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*, London, Penguin, 1990, p. 129.

then (re-)creation; this has been called both appropriation and salvaging”.<sup>4</sup> What happens with Marx’s ideas in *Neo Yokio* (2017), an American-Japanese-South Korean anime series created by Ezra Koenig is someplace in these Linda Hutcheon’s words. The series is “anime-inspired—it’s a hybrid”,<sup>5</sup> as Koenig sees it, and a tribute to anime bursting with references to *Neon Evangelion*, *Mad Bull 34*, *Tokyo Babylon*, *Ranma*, *Sailor Moon* and many other shows. While promoting the series, Koenig insisted on the veracity of his *japonisme* stating that

The initial idea of it being called “Neo Yokio” was slightly about seeing New York in an anime style. One of the things I’ve always loved about anime is that, even though it comes from Japan, it’s so international—so much of the big anime I love takes place in Italy or France or New York. There’s this really crazy, hyper-violent one about these gritty New York cops called Mad Bull 34 that made a big impression on me as a 12 year old. So working with anime artists to do New York in that style was intrinsic to the whole project. We would send these references to the animators—whether it was the Guggenheim, or a Cartier watch, or the Hamptons—and they’d do their thing. I like that layer of seeing the references through somebody else’s eyes. [...] But when I was thinking about making the show, my biggest concern was that we could only do it if we were working with Japanese partners. There is a lot of international animation that borrows heavily from anime style without actually employing Japanese people, and I didn’t want to be a part of that. I wanted to work with people who made the things that we’re referencing and paying tribute to. That was important to me.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Jonah Weiner, *Ezra Koenig on New Animated Series, Next Vampire Weekend LP*, in *The Rolling Stone*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/ezra-koenig-on-new-animated-series-next-vampire-weekend-lp-202762/> (accessed April 22, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Ryan Dombal, *Ezra Koenig on His New Anime Series and the Next Vampire Weekend Album*, in *Pitchfork*, September 22, 2017 (<https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/ezra-koenig-interview-new-anime-series-next-vampire-weekend-album/>, accessed March 21, 2020).

It is as if the creator of the show was trying clumsily to save the show's *aura*, to put in Benjamin's terms, its uniqueness and its non-fakeness in the *mare magnum* of pseudo-anime productions invading the global market nowadays; undoubtedly an important way to present the project bearing in mind that Benjamin himself, in the second version of *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* stated he was introducing "in the theory of art concepts that differ from those now current in that they are completely useless for the purposes of fascism",<sup>7</sup> and the show itself wants to appear as politically engaged in the same direction as we will see further on.

The show was originally planned to be aired on Fox's Animation Domination High-Definition block in 2015 or 2016, but it was never aired for unknown reasons, possibly because of the clash of network's agenda, the show's contents and the upcoming elections. It was later picked up by Netflix and streamed with a label Netflix Original Series. The storyline spanning over the six episodes plus the Christmas Special (aired in 2018) revolves around Kaz Kaan, an elegant and fashionable demon hunter struggling to stay afloat in the elite society of Neo Yokio while his emo-hamletic persona<sup>8</sup> is mourning the "death" of a recent relationship. The setting, Neo Yokio, is "the greatest city in the world" (ep. 1), and an obvious hybrid between *Akira's* Neo Tokyo and San Fransokyo of Disney Pixar's *Big Hero 6*. This alt-Big Apple (Fig. 1) is a strongly divided megalopolis with allusions on monarchy and a Lord Mayor as a supreme authority while huge corporations are structured as states and even more powerful. Its division is best stressed by a fact that the rich live basically on rooftops (e.g. their tennis courts as well

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, in Id., *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935-1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> "It's been a long time sitting on this show. But one of the first things we ever talked about with the character is that he's a little bit like Hamlet. He's supposed to be a Hamlet type dude, who's very in his feelings. And you know, there is always something kind of stylish about Hamlet too. It's like, maybe kind of emo, dealing with heartache, but definitely still caring about brands. I think probably all of us have a touch of that. So it always made sense that we would talk about real places, real brands". (Samuel Hine, *Jaden Smith Talks "Neo Yokio" With Ezra Koenig*, in *GQ Magazine*, in <https://www.gq.com/story/neo-yokio-jaden-smith-ezra-koenig-netflix-premiere>, accessed March 3rd 2020).



1. Aerial view of the city of Neo Yokio



2. Underwater part of Neo Yokio

as their cemeteries are on roofs of buildings; they even fly over the city on robots despising public transportation and those who make use of it, see ep. 6) while the poor live in on the roofs of the buildings the Long Island Walled City (ep. 6 again); everything south of 14th street is submerged by water (Fig. 2). This, a tad dantesque vertical clash up vs. down, even plays with the very toponomastics of the real life New York (i.e. Upper East Side, Lower East Side etc.). The Twin Towers still stand but they are underwater with

only roofs above surface, they are basically a rooftop restaurant, and are symbolically replaced by a building displaying a “bachelor board” with names of Neo Yokio’s ten most eligible bachelors. Classification is determined by wealth and social status, obviously, but even by a smallest *gaffe* or a social *faux pas* can make the name of the bachelors plummet. The Kaan family is a family of magistocrats, a term coined in lapalissian opposition to meritocracy, belonging to an ancient race arrived from Europe in order to help the Neo Yokians win the Great Demon War in the 18th century won in the “battle of the Rockefeller Center”.<sup>9</sup> In neoyokian social system the magistocrats, in spite of their lineage, are the *nouveau riches*, they have to work to maintain their status—the Kaan family matriarch, Kaz’s aunt Agatha (voiced by Susan Sarandon), runs a security company providing the elite of the city—state (allusions to Principauté du Monaco are also present)—with exorcisms from demonic presences, still trying to win back the city by infestating it. Ezra Koenig, born in the Eighties and intellectually came of age in the Nineties, builds up his anime as a series of *hommages* and citations within a perverted marxist frame. The analysis of the show helps to shed a light on what happened to Marx’s ideas within a millennial pop-cultural *Stimmung*. Koenig’s anime show is a part of what could be defined millennial socialism or marxism or even Marx’s revival and a segment within a growing interest in socialism and left-political theory among the millennials impelled by the crisis of capitalism and incited by the new media that emerged during the Bush/Obama and Cameron/Clegg era among which *n+1* (New York, 2004), *Endnotes* (Brighton, 2005), *The New Inquiry* (New York, 2009), and *Salvage* (London, 2015), with *The Baffler* relaunched in 2009 and *Dissent*, founded in 1954 and restyled in 2014; not to mention a slightly more elaborate project, at least in style and format, of *Jacobin*, founded in Washington DC in 2010, and Novara

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**9** In the show, the Battle of Rockefeller is said to have taken place in the eighteenth century and in the Special we see a giant propagandistic billboard representing the battle, with the *Gandalf*-like magistocrat figure, together with commemorative pocket watch with the year 1897 engraved on it. If the watch celebrates the one hundredth anniversary of the battle, it means it took place more or less in the same period as the French *Revolution* but with the opposite effect i.e. it gave power to the aristocrats. If we bare in mind that Koenig mentions ‘Lady Oscar’, an anime set in in the eighteenth century France, this allusion is highly probable.

Media, which followed a year later in London. Ideas as these are also found in books published by *Jacobin* editors Aaron Bastani or Bhaskar Sunkara in 2019.<sup>10</sup> Bastani's book, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* ideally recalls neoyokian universe since it proposes future alternatives to it, permeated as it is with references to Karl Marx, Pico della Mirandola, Luigi Pirandello etc. Bastani argues that climate change, resource scarcity, surplus populations, and technical unemployment, are syndromes of a dying socio-economic order. But technological advances in robotics and AI, as well as renewable energies, gene editing, synthetic meats, cellular agricultures, and (eventually) asteroid mining, provide opportunities to achieve Fully Automated Luxury Communism (FALC). This is when, under a realm of plenty, work is no longer a means of survival, but

becomes a route to self-development rather than a means of survival. Marx viewed this as contingent on technological change: the more developed the forces of production, the greater their capacity to offer a new kind of society where labour and leisure would blend into one (...)<sup>11</sup>

with work becoming more akin to play.<sup>12</sup>

Of course the new marxist trends did not pass unnoticed on the far-right part of the political spectrum and are perceived as part of the Cultural Marxism anti-semitic conspiracy theory existing since the post war era<sup>13</sup> and related to the Frankfurt school but intensified in the late 1990s by, among others, William S. Lind, Pat Buchanan and Paul Veyrich. In Anders Behring Breivik's 2011 Manifesto, *2083—A European Declaration of Independence*, cultural marxism is mentioned numerous times. On 22 July 2011, Breivik killed eight people by detonating a van bomb amid Regjeringskvartalet in Oslo, then shot dead 69 participants of a Workers' Youth League (AUF) summer

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**10** Bhaskar Sunkara, *The Socialist Manifesto. The Case For radical Politics in the Era of Extreme Inequality*, New York, Basic Books, 2019.

**11** Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*, London, Verso, 2019, p. 50.

**12** *Ibid.*, p. 55.

**13** See Jérôme Jamin, *Cultural Marxism and the Radical Right*, in A. Shekhovtsov; P. Jackson, (eds.), *The Post-War Anglo-American Far Right: A Special Relationship of Hate*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 84-103.

camp on the island of Utøya. In July 2012, he was convicted of mass murder, causing a fatal explosion, and terrorism. He is now serving a 21 prison sentence. In the show, the neoyokian establishment is represented as neocon or neoliberal. The coat of arms of the city display's a templar's cross of sorts, very similar to the one Breivik put on the cover of his manifesto.

## 2.

Umberto Eco argued that “the names of colours, taken in themselves, have no precise chromatic content: they must be viewed within the general context of many interacting semiotic systems”<sup>14</sup> and also that

the artistic activity, be it the poetry of Virgil or the research on pigments by Mondrian, works against social codes and collective categorization in order to produce a more refined social consciousness of our cultural way of defining contents.<sup>15</sup>

In *Neo Yokio* we constantly deal with one color: the theme colour of the show is pink (for instance, opening titles and end titles roll on the pink background, Kaz's hair and that of his relatives is pink, their eyes are pink etc.) and it is not a case. It is common understanding that the millennial pink “became a thing”, culturally speaking, mostly through two movies, Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006) and Wes Anderson's *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014). It's reification occurs with the release of iPhone 6S in “Rose Gold”, in 2015, when it became, matter-of-factly, *a thing*, a commodity.<sup>16</sup> The year after, Pantone Colore Insitute, in its more than ventennial tradition of dictating chromatic and commercial trends, announces that the color of the year 2016 is Rose Quartz, a colour very similar to what we define as the millennial pink today. Since then, it has become

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<sup>14</sup> Umberto Eco, *How Culture conditions the colours we see*, in Marshall Blonsky (ed.), *InSigns*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, p.173.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175

<sup>16</sup> This process is well exemplified in the show through Lexy and Gottlieb, Kaz's best friends, buisness adventures. The duo is trying to sell Caprese Martini, an unpalatable cocktail first by opening a ridiculously small, one-person bar, then by selling the canned version of it at parties and eventually, since nobody likes it, selling only the logoed merchandise because “it became a thing”.

a chromatic symbol of an entire millennial generation (1980-2000) proliferating in multiple directions withing a manifold universe of millennial stereotypes (such as weakness or “softness”).

“To be a thing” is, actually, a key expression for understanding millennial pink’s short history, not just in a slang, an idiolect or urban dictionary of sorts, it designates an emotional process through which humans make commodities and have social lives, as in Marx or Appadurai. Phraseologically and sociolinguistically, this asserting metaphorizes that anything, even something as subtle and labile as colours,<sup>17</sup> can be branded by global communities with an eye for trending commodities, like the so called hipsters etc. The utter reification of the real through consumerism, the serial possession of industrial luxurious goods or unique, personalized ones is in the focus in *Neo Yokio* where, in a product placement of a kind, a huge number of luxury goods are displayed only because the characters granted them with a larger than life position and status defining role through the “panmythologizing” (and, now, commodifying) language theorized by Barthes where “le mythe est une parole” and “chaque objet du monde peut passer d’une existence fermée, muette, à un état oral, ouvert à l’appropriation de la société, car aucune loi, naturelle ou non, n’interdit de parler des choses”.<sup>18</sup> For instance, Kaz Kaan strives to belong to neoyokian jet set that pushes him away as a *parvenu* (The Rat Catcher as a nickname, actually, implies an interesting word play: Rats are, clearly, the communist demons, the reds. Thus: reds = rats.). He buys and confirms his status through a commodity,

an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind. The nature of these

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**17** “Colors exist in very much the same way that art and love exist. They can be perceived, and other people will generally understand you if you talk about them. But colors don’t really exist as ‘things in the world’. Although you can make up objective definitions that make things like ‘green’, ‘art’, and ‘love’ more real, the definitions are pretty ad-hoc. Respectively: ‘green’ is light with a wavelength between 520 and 570 nanometers, ‘art’ is portraits of Elvis on black velvet, and ‘love’ is the smell of napalm in the morning” (Seth Stannard Cottrell, *Do Colours Exist and Other Profound Physics Questions*, Cham, Birkhauser, 2018, p. 155).

**18** Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1957, pp. 181-182.

needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach, or the imagination, makes no difference.<sup>19</sup>

Since the very exchange “is the source of the value”,<sup>20</sup> by buying his place in the high society Kaz sets in motion the cogs and the gears of the mechanism of “human transactions and calculations that enliven things”.<sup>21</sup> Thus, commodities, “like persons, have social lives”<sup>22</sup> and, in the world created by Ezra Koenig, the social life of commodities substitutes the one of human beings, they are alive: “Kaz: A tuxedo is a living thing, Lexy. You can’t just yank it out of storage the day of the ball. It needs to be reintroduced to human society, slowly and carefully” (ep. 2). Not to mention Kaz Kaan’s mecha-butler, a robot, clearly a commodity, but also his closest friend, like Samantha for Theodore Twombly in *Her*,<sup>23</sup> a person about whom we discover in the episode 4 that it’s manoeuvred by a short lady called Sadie from the inside, clearly an (auto)enslaved person, again a commodity. Subjects are transformed into objects through alienated industrial labor or even through excessive use of commodities; objects, through the same process, are transformed into subjective beings. Two opposed concepts, subject and object, reverse. Walter Benjamin understood the concept of commodity fetishism more thoroughly and articulated it in a more subtle way than Marx since for him it was clear that it manifested itself even better through objects of consumption, not through those of production, the former being a much more diffuse and thus powerful expression of collective consciousness of historical experience than the latter. Marx did not grasp that well the commodity’s status as a phantasmagoria, as an expression of the delusional and utopian fantasies of the collectivity. Benjamin saw this point more neatly and argued it through the analysis of the material culture of nineteenth-cen-

<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx, *op.cit.*, p. 170.

<sup>20</sup> Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> An analogy could be found between Charles and the software Samantha in Spike Jonze’s 2013 drama *Her* where Joaquin Phoenix has a romance with his operative system as if the director wants us to believe that commodities are people too since their incarnate our *desiderata*.

tury Paris, where the phantasmagoric aspects emerged through the continuous desire towards new commodities ending up recalling the primeval and the prehistoric. Commodities are perceived by Benjamin as the continuation of the Baroque emblem of death in 19th-century Paris. In the 17th century Europe was going through material ruin and famine so death imagery was, in a way, inevitable in the works of allegorists whereas in the 19th century with the pinnacle of industrial capitalism and economic prosperity things should have been seen differently and yet the death imagery persisted in Baudelaire's poetry. The same could be argued for the first quarter of the 21st century whose economic dynamics seems to reproduce those of the Baudelaire's century through the "economy of inequality"<sup>24</sup> or the "inequality regime"<sup>25</sup> in a continuum of historical distress of the human kind.

Human beings tend to wish-imagine the consequences of their compulsive shopping and project themselves into a instant numb state that substitutes a lost or inexistent state of utopia without realizing that the inner meaning, i.e. the use value of something, has been replaced with its exchange value: the value of something once it's exhibited in the shop window and commodified is its price while its essence is obliterated by the laws of the market. For example, a rather trivial, cheap object, can suddenly see its price skyrocket and become a fashionable commodity only because the variation of its price implies it became trendy and in demand by the market. Ezra Koenig, for instance, the creator of the show, in various interviews himself expressed positions that confirm this phantasmagoric perception of commodities ("I like how Ralph Lauren creates a mystical world through his clothing"). The price, furthermore, is rarely related to the essence of a thing. According to Benjamin, the allegory and the commodity share an important characteristic; each uses its form only as if it was a shell into which a limitless series of meanings can be poured: allegory takes an object, an image or a story, and empties it out so that what it may mean at any particular time has little to do with the signifier. The corollary to this in the commodity is that it too is a signifier to which any number of

**24** See Thomas Piketty, *L'économie des inégalités*, Paris, La Découverte, 2004.

**25** See Thomas Piketty, *Capital et idéologie*, Paris, Seuil, 2019.

arbitrary meanings can be assigned, in the form of price tag.<sup>26</sup> One of the most frequent functions attributed to the commodity can be found in Veblen's words according to which "In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence" which, in *Neo Yokio* is eventually calculated through the rankings on the Bachelor board.<sup>27</sup> The virtue of placing the commodity in an allegorical narrative and dressed in allegorical roles is that neither the commodity nor the allegorical form in which it appears is tied to any permanent meaning and so it can be continually responsive, as a "cipher", to that which most concerns and inspires consumers in a particular environment. Moreover, the switch between the human being and the commodity is fully understood if we take into account Benjamin's theory, expressed in *On the Mimetic Faculty*, arguing that "the mimetic genius was really a life-determining force for the ancients"<sup>28</sup> and also that

Children's play is everywhere permeated by mimetic modes of behavior, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. The child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher, but also a windmill and a train. Of what use to him is this schooling of his mimetic faculty?<sup>29</sup>

In prelapsarian times the faculty of mimicry might have been of use for the man to merge with nature, nowadays, bearing "in mind that neither mimetic powers nor mimetic objects remain the same in the course of thousands of years",<sup>30</sup> man emulates the world of commodities that he eventually becomes, at times selling his own parts voluntarily (one's virginity is sold online as a commodity). What *Neo Yokio* appears to be trying to do is to invert this process of

**26** See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA and London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 22.

**27** Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Pennsylvania, Penn State Electronic Classics, 2003, p. 26.

**28** Walter Benjamin, *On the Mimetic Faculty*, in Id. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, P. Demetz (edited and with introduction by), trans. E. Jephcott, New York and London, Harper Brace Jovanovich, 1978, p. 721.

**29** *Ibid.*, p. 720.

**30** *Ibidem.*

necrosis of the living and the enlivening the objects by zigzagging its feeble storyline among “homage[s]” or a “loving tribute[s]” or “parod[ies]” (all terms used by Koenig to define the show) which eventually aspire to become a benjaminian dialectical dismantlement of myths through dialectical images.

Having in mind that the concept of dialectical image might not even exist,<sup>31</sup> since it was never explicitly defined by Benjamin, one can follow the intuition in order to find the moments in which, in the show, we see the dialectics at a standstill: “Ambiguity is the figurative appearance of the dialectic, the law of the dialectic at a standstill. This standstill is Utopia, and the dialectical image therefore a dream image”.<sup>32</sup> Again, according to Benjamin, in the convolute N, “The [h]istory breaks down into images, not into stories” and fotograms in *Neo Yokio* could be interwoven, through “montage” into a constellation of dialectically opposite images that could be intuitively read as such since within some of them, also in the N convolute:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.

In other words, dialectical images, through “nonsensous similarities” connect different spatio-temporal elements revealing similarities underneath. The show displays the hypercommodification of reality through the accentuated protagonism of commodities that can be read as fragments of dialectical images since they are “dream images” and, thus, suitable to unmask the “dream-filled sleep” of capitalism and its vicious circular mechanism that uses the ancestral faculty of mimicry of mankind in a wrong way: instead of

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**31** “Can the point at issue be more definitively and incisively presented than by Rimbaud himself in his personal copy of [*Une saison en enfer*]? In the margin, beside the passage ‘on the silk of the seas and the arctic flowers’, he later wrote, ‘There’s no such thing’” (Walter Benjamin, *Surrealism in Id.*, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2 part 1, 1927-1934, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Cambridge, MA and London, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 208).

**32** Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, cit., p. 10.

merging with nature, man numbs himself into a dream of capitalism since the nature is now a commodified world.

In one of the first lines of the show's first episode, we read: "*Charles*: Sir, I understand that matters of the heart are mysterious and profound, but destroying a 1919 Cartier Tank is a bit, well... imprudent" (ep.1). The lines are those of the Kaz's mecha butler, Charles, voiced by Jude Law, programmed to instantly please his master but also one of the most subversive characters on the show. From that moment on, the lives of the characters revolve around commodities and their favourite activity appears to be nothing else but competitive shopping ("You are a true master, sir. Watching you shop purely by touch is inspiring", says the Salesclerk in ep.1) in spite of Kaz's pretentious exhibitions of emo-melancholy or "wisdom", quite similar to Jaden Smith somewhat improbable but quotable tweets ("Win, lose... we'll all be equal in the grave.; Who cares what time it is when the future's an interminable abyss of wackness?", ep. 1). The importance of commodities and their central role will be acquiring importance throughout the show and becoming inversely proportional to that of the characters with an acme in the Christmas special (*Pink Christmas*, aired in 2018). The entire first episode is centered on the exorcism that Kaz has to perform on Helena St. Tessero, a fashion blogger (with followers called the Helenists<sup>33</sup>) voiced by Tavi Gevinson, the world most famous fashion blogger, irl. To be more specific, the exorcism is to be performed on Helena's Chanel suit ("The prime minister of Chanel presented her with a custom suit", ep.1). In his trying to exorcise her Kaz fails because it is the commodity that appears to be possessed:

*Kaz*: In fact, she only received it a week ago. It wasn't subject to the same security procedures as other luxury items. It was open, it was vulnerable... The perfect place for a demon to hide!

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**33** Helena's followers call themselves Helenists without knowing, of course, the meaning of the word. When Helena St. Tessero goes "hikikomori" her followers do the same thing simply because it's fashionable. They are probably surprised and shocked when she organizes a terrorist attack, a very nine-eleven like one, on the building displaying the Bachelor board. It's pretty much what happens with communist memorabilia and marxist ideas in the show.

*Charles:* Could it really be?

*Kaz:* Yes, Charles. The reason I couldn't exorcise Helena was because it wasn't her, but rather her suit that was possessed.

*Charles:* Brilliant, sir (ep.1).

Verb "to possess" acquires here a new and deeper meaning: a man or a woman possess their clothing items as empty forms but the *vêtements* eventually end up possessing human beings engaged into piling up commodities in order not to see, or to postpone death. Paradoxically, in the show, the only unpossessed and free commodities are those possessed by the demons close to the spectre of communism launching their mind-opening message. As history teaches us, though, communism leads its radical followers to be possessed by the very idea.

After failing, Kaz is asked to leave as a *persona non grata*, since he is tolerated only for the service he erogates, as commodified as he is—he also is a commodity. The demonic component of the show and all the haunting recall, of course, Marx's well known *incipit*:

A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism. All the Powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and German police-spies.<sup>34</sup>

The universe of *Neo Yokio* shows basically what happened to the spectre in future: it has been demonized, marginalized. *In brevi*, capitalist consumerism swept away the communism demonizing the latter as the consequence of what a surprisingly terse Benjamin wrote in the Thirties: "Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces"<sup>35</sup> Benjamin's image of slumber engulfing the Old world, the metaphor is quite similar to Marx's one of the spectre, is one of the numerous occasions in which Benjamin completes Marx, with whose philosophy he had an eccentric relationship.

<sup>34</sup> Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, London, Verso, 2016, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, op. cit., p. 379.

That being said, practically none of the characters on the show is capable of engaging a constructive and meaningful conversation or something perceived as such by his similars. Human faculties are metaphorized and poured into those of commodities identified with brands producing luxury goods: “*Kaz*: Man, her voice is pure cashmere. *Charles*: As if from Loro Piana, sir”, (ep. 2). In a similar conjunction, human being are mere products of their environment. In ep. 2, Sailor Pellegrino, “just a humble pop star from North Cackalacka”, and an allusion to Taylor Swift, to *Sailor Moon* anime and an onomastical allusion to an Italian brand of mineral water, is frowned upon but tolerated, as *Kaz* for his powers, merely for her capacity to sell “one billion records” and named Neo Yokio Global Ambassador to promote the city as if it was a brand. Being herself basically a commodity—*Kaz* is not her fan but “fan of her success”—she becomes a vehicle for a demon to introduce himself into a Met Gala of sorts to steal a real life work of art, the controversial Damien Hirst’s *For the Love of God* (2007) (Fig. 3):

*Kaz*: I’ve never heard of a demon hiding in a Greek statue.

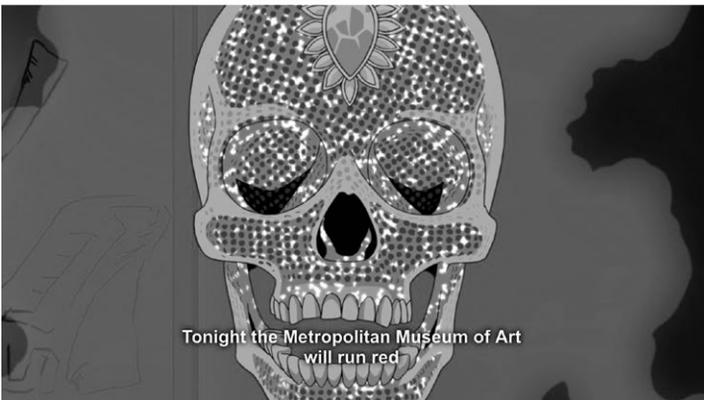
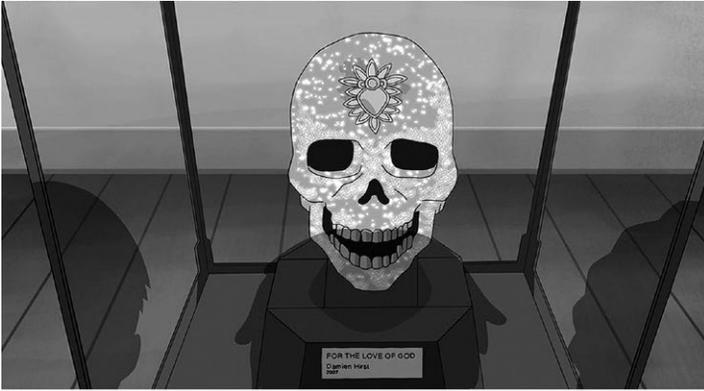
*Curator*: But surely you’ve heard of a demon hiding in a diamond.

*Kaz*: *For the Love of God*, Damien Hirst, 2007. A platinum cast of a human skull, encrusted with 8.601 flawless diamonds. Perhaps the greatest work of art, ever. It’s a goddamn demon’s paradise. A demon can use a diamond to transform and magnify its powers. It’s like Botox for the bastards. Uh, fine. Let’s take a look. As I expected, just a perfectly normal jewel-encrusted skull.

*Curator*: No demons?

*Kaz*: Not a one (ep.2).

Hirst’s diamond-studded head, as the very artist noted, is to be considered as a continuation of the repertoire of the European seventeenth century *vanitas* tradition in which skulls, as *memento mori*, appear to caution the viewer of impending death and the transience of worldly goods (Fig. 4). But Hirst’s object is not meant to be an extension of the legacy of *vanitas*, but an inversion and obliteration of it. Hirst’s numerous statements argue that he created the diamond



3. *For the Love of God* by Damien Hirst, as visualized in *Neo Yokio* series



4. Harmen Steenwijck, *Vanitas (Nature morte)*, 1640, oil on panel; National Gallery, London

skull not as a meditation on the futility of worldly gain, but as a triumph of “treasure over death” with the “foreverness of diamonds”<sup>36</sup> of the casing impossible to decay. Instead of deflecting the attention from death and decay, Hirst’s skull accentuates grotesquely their features in the show positioning itself in opposition to the, say, Dutch art of the Golden Age *vanitas* with its *natura morta* poetics. It equally celebrates greed, lust for power etc., in the context that, as Deborah Silverman argues, enhanced Hirst’s own rise to fame:

Three types of extremism distinctive to the context of the past seven years, I argue, facilitated Hirst’s ascendancy and allowed his art to flourish in unprecedented ways, providing an unusual and distinctive convergence of personal delinquency and cultural derangement: a hedge fund economy of

**36** See Damien Hirst Hirst, “The ultimate luxury wealth against death [sic] diamond covered skull”; “FUCK OFF TO DEATH!”; “Decoration against death”; “The diamond skull diamonds are forever”. All these sketches and notes are gathered in *In For the Love of God: The making of the diamond skull*. London, Other Criteria / White Cube. 2007.

greed and speculative fever; a politics of contempt for rules, corruption and impunity; and a society marked by perpetual war, permissible torture and violence at a distance. I consider Hirst's as what I call "hazmat art in an era of cultural deregulation" and emphasize the character of the work as physical poison and cultural toxin.<sup>37</sup>

In this sense, in spite of the difference between Hirst's poetics and the seventeenth century one, the use of the skull in *Neo Yokio* uses both points of view because Hirst's poetics could easily merge with the *Weltanschauung* of *Neo Yokio* while the "marxist" demonic presence intends to possess and destroy the skull in order to transform it into *memento mori* showing the transience of earthly pleasures revealing the futility of material wealth. The skull's role is similar to the role of ruins and death symbols in the works of 17th century allegorists representing "human suffering and material ruin".<sup>38</sup> In Benjamin's words:

Everything about history that [...] has been untimely, unsuccessful, sorrowful is expressed in a face—or rather in a death's head ...[It's] the form in which the human subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of the human existence as such, but also of the biographic historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing. [The] importance [of history] resides solely in the stations of its decline".<sup>39</sup>

However, this allegorical object does not serve the unique purpose of reminding us that *omnia* is, indeed, *vanitas* but also to convey the idea of allegory of Resurrection<sup>40</sup> whose attempt takes place through

**37** Deborah Silverman, *Marketing Thanatos: Damien Hirst's Heart of Darkness*, in *American Imago*, Vol. 68, No. 3, 2011, pp. 391-424.

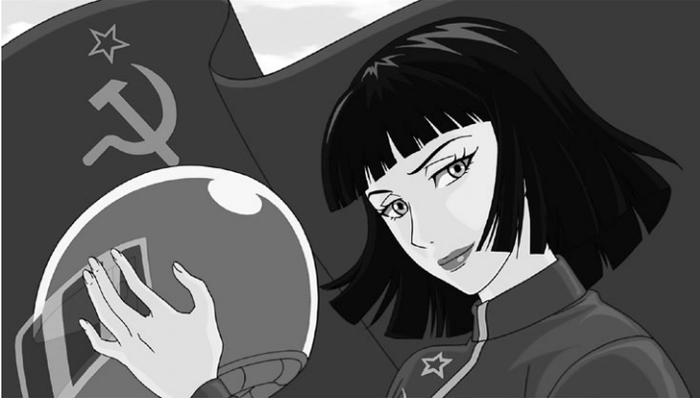
**38** Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1989, p. 178.

**39** Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London, Verso, 1990, origin, p. 166.

**40** "The intention does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones [or human skull], but faithfully leaps forward to the idea of resurrection" (Benjamin, *The Origin*, cit., p. 233).

the revolutionary gesture of the demons attempting to destroy the skull using pop star Sailor Pellegrino as a vessel and threatening that “the Metropolitan Museum of Art will run red with the blood of the bourgeoisie!” and accusing Kaz of “insist[ing] on staying on the wrong side of history” (ep. 2). The importance of use of Hirst’s skull in the show is even more important if we consider what Ezra Koenig says about the genesis of the show:

One of my truly favourite things in the show is the Soviet race car driver. It really was quite a weird story. Three or four summers ago, I was in Monaco and they were setting up for the Grand Prix. Monaco basically is an anime location—it’s such a surreal place, the geography and the architecture is so strange, like (Hayao) Miyazaki created it from a bunch of Mediterranean replicas. So we were in Monaco and I was having a coffee in the morning, and “God Save the Queen” was just blasting off the speakers. This was in the morning, and I guess they were testing the different national anthems. *Monaco is like a giant crypt, so there were all of these weird echoes created by these tall buildings that open to the mountain.* I was looking out of the window and just hearing “God Save the Queen”, echoing through this Mediterranean anime location, and I just had this weird thought: “What if this Soviet race car driver won this lap and the Soviet national anthem was playing?” Also, I love Formula One outfits because they’re so crazy. The entire idea was that everybody else is covered in logos and the Soviet race car driver just comes out, and the car and the outfit is all red with a hammer and sickle. I thought, “We’ve gotta put that in the show somehow”. And we worked really hard to try and incorporate that. I remembered Kim Kardashian wearing this like long red communist thing and I was like, “I don’t even know what’s happening or if we’re right on the money, but I guess I’m glad that’s in there”. You know, communism never goes out of fashion. As long as there’s capitalism, there’ll be communism. There were people who saw the trailer who were triggered by the fact that there was a communist in it, and that we used a diverse background of people. So I have a feeling that the show is



5. Mila Malevich as a Formula 1 driver

not for those people. I thought that maybe they'd like it once they'd seen the show, but then I thought about everything that's in the show and... nah, they're not gonna like it.<sup>41</sup>

### 3.

This lengthy quote deserves a thorough reading. The use of Monaco and its Grand Prix in the show as part of the Neo Yokio megalopolis and its resemblance to the crypt are of great importance. The association of the aforementioned tax haven and its symbolic cargo to the death evokes the Benjamin's baroque imagery and projects it onto the Hirst's skull implying the possibility of some kind of change/revolution that, however, does not take place through the Soviet driver Mila Malevich (Fig. 5), eventually seduced by the neoyokian lifestyle, but through Kaz Kaan himself, in the Christmas special—*Pink Christmas*. The final episode opens with a focus on a Salesclerk (voiced by Richard Ayoade) an utterly alienated person and a believer in the neoyokian system of values and traditions and devoutly serves as a personal shopper to Kaz Kaan and other characters even though that very system makes him live in the margins, in misery, and eventually pushes him away firing him from the department store.

<sup>41</sup> Marianne Eloise, *Ezra Koenig breaks down his new animated series for Netflix*, in *Dazed*, 20th september 2017 (<https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/37475/1/ezra-koenig-breaks-down-his-new-netflix-anime>, accessed, 22 january 2020) (my underlining).

The Salesclerk is chosen by the Demon as a vehicle for a revolution (*Demon*: “You are the perfect vessel for the revolution, far better than Chanel suits and popstars”, Ch.sp.). During the six episodes of the show and culminating in the special Kaz Kaan undergoes a change he constantly refused before. Even though his ex girlfriend Helena St. Tessero radically changed her attitude towards Neo Yokio and its way of life, he still keeps visiting her and protects and hides her from the Remebrancer (a grand inquisitor of a kind voiced by Steve Buscemi) after she organized the terrorist attack on the Bachelor board destroying the building with a bomb (Kaz’s friend nickname her “Helena St’ Terrorist”). Helena’s ideas, phrased overtly with marxist terminology at first appear excessively radical to Kaz:

*Helena*: Oh, Kaz. I’ve come to realize, it doesn’t matter what you wear.

*Kaz*: That’s an odd thing for a fashion blogger to say.

*Helena*: I am not a fashion blogger anymore.

*Kaz*: Of course you are. Don’t be hard on yourself just because you’ve taken a sabbatical.

*Helena*: Kaz, you don’t understand. Something’s changed in me since the exorcism. I’m done searching for meaning in the aesthetic cycles of commodities.

*Kaz*: Fashion is not a commodity.

*Helena*: Oh, yeah? What is it, then?

*Kaz*: It’s a glimmer of hope in a cruel world. I’m not joking, Helena.

*Helena*: I’m not joking either, Kaz. The Black and White Ball is a vapid celebration of capitalist values. I think we should boycott it, together.

*Kaz*: But it’s gonna be so fun.

*Helena*: It’s a grotesque display of wealth.

*Kaz*: But our friends are gonna be there.

*Helena*: Friends? They’re petulant snobs!

*Kaz*: You sound crazy.

*Helena*: I sound enlightened.

After her attempted exorcism they both start to change in spite of Kaz’s refusal to do so and once he accepts to help Helena escape



6. The Communist Kaz is giving a talk

during the Neo Yokio Grand Prix in episode 6 he admits Helena might be on the right side.<sup>42</sup> The turning point takes place during the race when Kaz's races through the forbidden part of the city hiding Helena in his car<sup>43</sup> after protecting her dressed as Mila Malevich in the press conference<sup>44</sup> (Fig. 6) and sees the impoverished and exploited parts of the city (the aforementioned Salesclerk lives there). The final episode of the season closes on Kaz's unsettling thoughts<sup>45</sup> announcing the revolutionary change of the special. The show's special is almost entirely set within a dreamlike dimension: it's Christmas time, the most capitalist time of the year (the

**42** Kaz admits that her Bachelor Board bombing gives him a sense of relief even if he considers her to be an "enemy of the state" for a moment and she thinks he is "a brainwashed tool of the regime": *Kaz*: I refuse to believe it. *Helena*: I blew up the Bachelor Board. Accept it. *Kaz*: No, it doesn't make any sense. You're not a terrorist. *Helena*: The Bachelor Board was a symbol of misery. Don't you feel better now that it's gone? *Kaz*: I guess I do, but it's our culture. *Helena*: A culture built on hatred, greed and the subjugation of the working class. *Sadie*: You know she's right, Kazzy. *Kaz*: I liked things a lot better when you stayed inside Charles (ep. 6).

**43** *Charles*: Brace yourself, sir. You're heading into the Walled City. *Kaz*: The Walled City? But don't people live there? *Charles*: Sir, Neo Yokio doesn't concern itself with the safety of its slum denizens. *Kaz*: I'm starting to think Neo Yokio's not the greatest city in the world. *Crowd*: Bougie pig, don't you know we're dying down here? *Kaz*: I'm so sorry, everybody (ep. 6).

**44** *Kaz*: Ah! Miss Malevich has no words for you puppets of the West. Communism forever! (ep. 6).

**45** *Kaz*: Everything has fallen back into place. And yet, I can't help but feel that Neo Yokio is about to explode (ep. 6).



7. Kaz is falling into the pink void

episode opens with shop windows and the restored Bachelor board), and Neo Yokio indulges in its rituals (“*Charles*: Come, sir, there’s more to the holidays than shopping and seasonal beverages. *Kaz*: Is there, *Charles*?”), but Kaz Kaan has a flu and his mecha-butler starts reading the Old Testament but gets interrupted by Kaz who refuses it in a quasi-revolutionary gesture<sup>46</sup> and the robot starts a *Christmas Carol*-like tale, a “bespoke story, something tailor made for a man of your exquisite taste” which becomes Kaz’s dream as he falls asleep.

During his oneiric antics Kaz gets drugged and since the drug (MDNA) is made with the genetic code of a demon he is overwhelmed with anti-luxury impulses (drinks water instead of cocktails etc.) and hallucinates into a conversation with a Great Demon floating in the all pink eternity (Fig. 7):

*Kaz*: God Lord, I’ve become a cartoon!

*Great Demon*: You’ve always been a caricature of a human being, only now you see it.

*Kaz*: Who are you?

*Great Demon*: Don’t you recognize me? I am the empty

<sup>46</sup> *Kaz*: Sorry im ‘really not feeling this *Charles*: Sir, this is the greatest sstory evert old *Kaz*: Whoever says that, is cuckoo bananas. There’s no action, no stakes, no drama (Ch. Sp.).

feeling that haunts you—I am the Great Demon [...]

*Great Demon:* Who are you to say what is real? You live a life of fantasy. You know only the fictions of the marketplace.

*Kaz:* I just want this unpleasant experience to be over.

*Great Demon:* You really want it to end?

*Kaz:* Yes, for god's sake, please.

*Great Demon:* Then restore the cosmic balance.

*Kaz:* How do I do that? (Ch. Sp.)

Damien Hirst's skull, put in perspective, acquires a dialectical dimension in a benjaminian sense. It becomes a part of a larger constellation referencing to death/resurrection bynom that starting with the crypt innuendo in Koenig's interview and culminating in the Christmas Special with Kaz's Aunt Angelique (Aunt Agatha's black twin sister with, of course, pink hair). Her presence is eye-opening for Kaz not only because of her opinion on Neo Yokio ("*Angelique:* This city has the stink of death upon it") but in spite of the fact she represents values opposite to Kaz's and those of her twin sister he shows deep and genuine affection for her, pretty much like with Helena St. Tesserò. After being drugged, Kaz talks to Angelique about his conversation with a demon in a pink universe and she tries to prepare him for what is about to happen in the show's finale:

*Angelique:* Pink is a very profound colour...

*Kaz:* Honestly, it's kinda outta fashion... There was this demon but he didnt want to fight, he just wanted to talk.

*Angelique:* And did you listen?

*Kaz:* I tried but he really wasn't making any sense. The vibe was very forebodin, though. The whole situation was pretty buff.

Aunt Angelique's Christmas present for her nephew is a huge Toblerone—once more a commodity in a key role—with a manuscript of her memoir inside ("*Psychotic ramblings of a liberal mind*", as Aunt Agatha puts it, Fig. 8) a memoir revealing secrets about Kaan family and their demonic heritage confirmed by the Great Demon in the showdown with Kaz. The Demon will use the possessed Salesclerk (his name is revealed only in the Special) he saved from the



8. Kaz and Aunt Angelique, and the Toblerone with the memoir in it



9. Possessed Herbert the Salesclerk

attempted suicide after being sacked. The showdown takes place in what seem to be Neo Yokio catacombs. Kaz needs to kill the possessed Salesclerk (Fig. 9) in order to bring the Great Demon on surface for only the magistocrats have the power. Kaz can't do it so Aunt Agatha, merciless towards the socially inferior, does. Salesclerk starts bleeding pink and the entire megalopolis is flooded with pink, the colour we learn more about from Demon's words to Kaz:

*Great Demon:* What was here before Neo Yokio?

*Kaz:* There was nothing here before Neo Yokio.



10. Christ-like Kaz on the cover of *Pink Christmas*

*Great Demon:* Wrong! In the beginning there was pink space and it was beautiful. Then came the invasion. The higher they build their city, the further they drove us underground. They wanted to destroy us once and for all. But they weren't strong enough. They could only win by using our own power against us. Your ancestors made a wicked deal to help them and in exchange for that treachery they were given wealth and curse.

*Kaz:* So the magistocrats are nothing more than demon turn-coats?

*Great Demon:* Yes.

The pink flood marks the end of Charles' story, Kaz wakes up confused and wonders whether the city was destroyed or it was restored, Sadie leaves her mechanic body and goes to church ("Kaz: Pray for me"). The show closes leaving the doubt of the resurrection, as in Benjamin's words quoted earlier, but paradoxically it's not even important. What actually matters is that we really don't know the consequences of the "pink revolution" or the "pink Christmas", for that matter (Fig. 10), the same way we still don't know the actual reach of the millennial marxist revival. In a world of spectres, of the "dream-filled sleep" of capitalism, we can only seek for potential "dream-images", dialectical coordinations of signs, as tool to unmask the reified reality we live in. But if a potentially

enlightening cultural content is on a OTT platform like Netflix, it remains quite an elitistic experience, more of a desire for activist experience in a blooming carrier<sup>47</sup> as in words of Arcangelo Corelli, Kaz's jet set arch-nemesis (voiced by Jason Schwartzman)<sup>48</sup> or a "wish-image", to put it in Benjamin's words once again, but not much more. *Rebus sic stantibus*, Millennial revolution is basically a narration, a discourse—a bedtime story told by a mecha-butler to his feverish young master or a memoire in a luxury chocolate are the *pièces de resistance* of the show—not an actual change taking place or a decisive action undertaken volutarily by humans, it's a wish-image conveyed through another commodity—a tv show. In that sense, Kim Kardashian's 770\$ hoodie, mentioned by Koenig,<sup>49</sup> is just vintage-y piece of clothing referencing an ex-world or a dead dream of communist countries, it wouldn't change much if it was pink, at least we could symbolically see it as depotentiated red, or it is already enough that it's being worn by Mrs. Kardashian? Even more ironically, the company that launched the hoodie, *Vêtements* explains a lot with its own name. *Vêtements* is just clothing items.

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**47** "But that said, on a personal level, reaching this point in my career where I made three albums with Vampire Weekend, one cartoon with Jaden, and a handful of songs with other people, I do feel like I'm entering a new phase. In terms of not being scared to say what you want to say, that's pretty important. If I can't do that at age 33, I'll probably never be able to do it" (Ryan Dombal, *Ezra Koenig on His New Anime Series and the Next Vampire Weekend Album*, cit.).

**48** Arcangelo Corelli: Our gross capitalist culture tells us that we are the things we buy. But honestly, fuck that. Our generation doesn't want to buy things, we want to buy experiences (Ch.Sp.).

**49** See Mitja Velikonja, Lost in Transition. Nostalgia for Socialism in Post-socialist Countries, in "East European Politics and Societies", Vol. 23, Num. 4, Fall 2009, pp. 535-551.