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Richard Linklater's post-nostalgia and the temporal logic of neoliberalism

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Of all the main Oscar contenders in the 2015 awards season, few were as widely and intensely beloved as Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* (2014). This low-budget, independent production, pieced together over the course of twelve years, had by February 2015 in fact received so much acclaim that an "anti-*Boyhood* backlash" was already in full swing (Adams 2015): many critics and film bloggers were describing it by that point not as the little indie that could, but as prestigious "Oscar bait"—no longer an experimental work of film art, but an audience-pleasing, high-concept arthouse blockbuster. At the same time, many saw in *Boyhood* not only a compelling and profound experiment in narrative cinema, but also the culmination of thematic motifs and aesthetic compulsions that have featured prominently throughout Linklater's career as an independent director. The film's success therefore offers a compelling opportunity to investigate the changing nature of American film auteurism, as Linklater's enduring interest in the ephemerality of time connects to the emerging spirit of capitalism in the neoliberal age.

Boyhood's overwhelming popular and critical appeal illustrates first Linklater's ability to occupy a middle ground in the American film industry: on the one hand, he expresses post-classical Hollywood's reliance on directors with a track record in edgy, indie productions, while at the same time embodying arthouse cinema's own form of high-concept gimmickry. But secondly, and perhaps more productively, the *Boyhood* phenomenon

provides a useful occasion to examine in more detail the ambiguous role of the American film auteur in the twenty-first century. Like Steven Soderbergh, his style is one of radical eclecticism, alternating experimental independent films with documentaries, television work, and mainstream studio productions. Like the Coen brothers and Quentin Tarantino, his primary register is that of explicit and emphatic cinephilia, often fusing and combining images, patterns, and motifs from highly diverse film favorites like a cinematic magpie. But unlike other successful “indie” directors such as Christopher Nolan, Sam Raimi, Marc Webb, James Mangold, or Jon Favreau, Linklater has over the past twenty-five years carefully maintained his status as an independent-minded auteur figure who hasn’t leveraged his arthouse success into a career in superhero blockbusters.

As eclectic as Linklater’s output has been in terms of genre and visual style, I will use this chapter to examine more closely a thematic motif that has featured repeatedly throughout his filmic oeuvre. More specifically, I wish to interrogate and historicize the director’s focus on questions of pastness, temporality, and nostalgia, offering some suggestions on how to interpret these motifs’ resonance in the context of global capitalism. I approach Linklater’s ambiguous treatment of pastness and nostalgia as an expression of some of the contradictions inherent in the cultural logic of neoliberalism. By taking as my main case studies some of the films that articulate neoliberalism’s post-historical framework, I argue that this particular director’s cinematic representation of pastness resonates strongly with global capitalism’s market logic, just as his flexibility and unpredictability as an auteur fits the post-industrial context of precarious labor and just-in-time delivery systems.

Since the production of his first experimental film *It’s Impossible to Plow by Reading Books* (1988), Linklater’s output as a director has spanned multiple genres, styles, and industrial contexts, from experimental independent features such as *Waking Life* (2001) and *Tape* (2001) to mainstream Hollywood comedies such as *School of Rock* (2003) and *Bad News Bears* (2005). The reception of his first two features illustrates the tension that would come to define his ongoing career as a writer-director: his experimental, micro-budget breakthrough *Slacker* (1991) led critics to proclaim him a fresh representative of Generation X concerns, while studio production *Dazed and Confused* (1993) was dismissed by most as a period, high-school comedy. But while it may be tempting to frame Linklater in Scorsese’s familiar “one for them one for yourself” strategy (Grist 2013, 213), his career rather indicates an industrial context in which the binary distinction between “studio” and “independent,” between “mainstream” and “arthouse” appears less solid. Instead, his output is marked by a truly entrepreneurial flexibility, where each film is treated like a project reflecting the networked nature of the new spirit of global capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007, 106–7).

In order to address at least some of the range of Linklater's output and its relationship to issues of temporality and nostalgia, this chapter is divided into three sections, each of which focuses on specific films that establish and develop these thematic concepts. First, in order to introduce what I will call Linklater's post-nostalgic sensibility, I will discuss his first studio production *Dazed and Confused*, which draws on the style associated with Jameson's nostalgia mode while simultaneously attempting to move beyond it. The second section develops the concept of nostalgia and temporality further by examining more closely Linklater's *Before* Trilogy (*Before Sunrise* [1995], *Before Sunset* [2004], and *Before Midnight* [2013]).¹ By looking both at the films individually and at the temporal gaps they foreground as a serialized cycle, I will relate the central tension they embody to global capitalism's emerging framework of "timeless time" (Castells 2010, 406). Finally, I will bring these threads together in a discussion of the popular compressed-time epic *Boyhood*, which brings together many of the thematic concepts that underlie Linklater's auteurist profile. But while *Dazed and Confused* and the *Before* films resist the cultural logic of neoliberalism, I will argue that *Boyhood* paradoxically reinforces the post-historical spirit of global capitalism and what Paul Virilio has described as its "war on Time" (2006, 69).

Dazed and Confused: Linklater's post-nostalgia mode

For Fredric Jameson, the nostalgia mode is an important ingredient of what he defined as the postmodern aesthetic (1991, 286–7). Theorizing postmodernism toward the end of the 1980s as the cultural logic of late capitalism, Jameson perceived in films like *American Graffiti* (1973), *Star Wars* (1977), *Grease* (1978), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Body Heat* (1981), and *Back to the Future* (1985) a nostalgic articulation of pastness that romanticized earlier historical periods. This operation took place at two levels: first, through the spectacular visual creation of historical periods in the form of a "glossy mirage," as in *American Graffiti*, *Grease*, and *Back to the Future*; and secondly, through the absorption of narrative modes and aesthetic conventions that evoked older forms of popular entertainment, as in *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Body Heat*, and countless other post-classical blockbusters.

Jameson's nostalgia mode makes perfect sense in the context of the political alliance between neoliberal economic policies and neoconservative sociocultural values, which began during the Nixon administration and took full form during the Reagan-Thatcher era of the 1980s (Harvey 2005, 82). Its totalizing logic presents what Jameson describes as "a collective

wish-fulfillment, and the expression of a deep, unconscious yearning for a simpler and more human social system” (1991, 283). The main effect of this nostalgia mode is the insistent reification of the styles, fashions, and narrative registers of earlier periods results in the dissolution of any sense of historicity, and the diminished ability to develop what he calls a “cognitive mapping” of the material realities of late capitalism. The nostalgia mode therefore embodies postmodern culture’s dehistoricizing effect, as the reification of earlier periods robs us of our own sense of agency while contributing both in form and content to the neoconservative ideological agenda.

Following on from Lukács, Jameson therefore called for a “post-nostalgic” register, one that breaks through the nostalgia mode’s inherent neoconservatism and establishes a productive sense of historicity. This term is a crucial one for Jameson, and one that “can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history: that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective” (1991, 284). While the nostalgia mode of the 1970s and 1980s worked against this perception of the present as history, the suggested post-nostalgic mode might result in films that help the viewer experience the present as history, thereby offering tools to facilitate cognitive mapping and allowing the result to become a form of “political art” (Jameson 1992, 188–9).

This post-nostalgic mode might at the same time resurrect some of the political potential associated with modernist authorship. In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Jameson argued that late capitalist culture reduces modernism’s utopian imaginary and “authorial impulse” to indiscriminate pieces of cultural junk:

This discrediting of the “literary,” and the assimilation to it of themes and ideas of the older type, is omnipresent in contemporary (Western) film production, which has triumphantly liquidated its high modernist moment—that of the great *auteurs* and their stylistic “worlds”—and along with them the genuine “philosophies” to which film-makers like Bergman and Welles, Hitchcock and Kurosawa, could palpably be seen to aspire.

(1992, 24)

In this typical burst of energetic hyperbole, Jameson here effectively declares the modernist auteur dead in the age of late capitalism, associating postmodern film culture with the use of pastiche and its empty imitation of “dead styles” (1998, 6). But as Linda Hutcheon has maintained, even within the aesthetics of postmodern pastiche and historiographical metafiction, there remain abundant opportunities for creative resistance to ideological imperatives (Jameson 1988, 26–7).

Arriving in cinemas a few short years after the Cold War’s end ushered in

the age of truly global capitalism, *Dazed and Confused* on the surface seems to mimic the nostalgia film's ahistorical mode of postmodern pastiche. Iconic 1970s nostalgia film *American Graffiti* is the film's most obvious precursor and reference point, and one from which *Dazed* also inherits its "multistranded plot structure and pervasive sense of banality" (Harrod 2010, 23). The film's Aristotelian unity of time operates in combination with a soundtrack full of popular radio hits from a decade-and-a-half before the film's release, while the absence of a central plot foregrounds the social relations among the diverse ensemble cast. But while George Lucas's sentimental resurrection of the early 1960s is emphatically framed as a pre-Vietnam era of youthful innocence, *Dazed and Confused* offers a radically different perspective on pastness. While the fact that the film so painstakingly recreates a recent historical moment unavoidably mobilizes some degree of built-in nostalgic appeal, this film goes out of its way to avoid glamorizing or fetishizing the reconstructed past it portrays. As Linklater puts it in the audio commentary he recorded in 2006:

I didn't want to say: "there was this other era, when people acted differently, and it was an innocent time, before..." Bullshit! This was the 70s, after the 60s, after all the assassinations, after the war. ... Things were just calming down a little bit, so it was *post-lost* innocence. There really was nowhere to return to. That's why this notion of nostalgia is such bullshit.

Instead of ossifying its past as a romantic moment that becomes an object for pleasurable consumption, Linklater's film instead emphasizes a much more ambiguous representation of pastness that does indeed more closely approximate what Jameson as describes as "more complex 'postnostalgia' statements and forms" (1991, 287). This sentiment is expressed repeatedly and explicitly throughout the film, its characters inhabiting the fashions and styles of their era with the kind of obvious awkwardness that Adam Kotsko has provocatively identified as global capitalism's fundamental social form (2010, 9), while expressing repeatedly their strong sense of alienation from their own historical moment.

This post-nostalgic sentiment is articulated most explicitly on the occasions where characters in the film reflect upon their era. Articulating a playful theory about their formative decade, one of the more loquacious teenagers tries to see a cyclical logic in the post-war decades: "The fifties were boring, the sixties rocked, the seventies, ohmigod, they obviously suck ... Who knows: maybe the eighties will be radical!" The line comments ironically on the notorious neoconservatism of the 1980s from the point of view of the early 1990s, while actively disrupting the film's nostalgic potential by critiquing the historical age it reproduces. This way of showing characters' uncomfortable relationship with their

historical present is profoundly different from the dominant style in the nostalgia mode: films like *Grease* and *Back to the Future* and TV shows like *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974–84) show characters comfortably inhabiting the familiar styles of the past, implicitly reinforcing the cultural, social, and political conservatism of the emerging neoliberal moment at which these films were produced and consumed. But Linklater's characters are not stereotypes that resonate with a preconceived notion of a stable and unchanging sense of "1970s-ness." Instead, they resemble more closely the assortment of directionless Generation Xers featured so prominently in his previous indie hit *Slacker*: homegrown philosophers, pop-culture obsessives, functional sociopaths, clueless conformists, and precocious, teenaged intellectuals. Together, they spend the film reflecting on their own lack of direction much more than they do pursuing clear goals, thus expressing an obviously postmodern and thoroughly awkward sense of aimlessness and alienation.

This post-nostalgic sensibility is summed up most clearly in a scene toward the end of the film, where the characters reflect on their own historical moment, and their expectations about pre-constituted nostalgia for their teenage years. While discussing with his friends the limitations of their provincial surroundings and teenagers' self-conscious *ennui*, main character Randall "Pink" Floyd ends the discussion by stating: "All I'm saying is that if I ever start referring to these as the best years of my life—remind me to kill myself." This positively anti-nostalgic moment expresses a tension in the film that short-circuits the nostalgia mode's primary function, which is to present history as fixed and immutable. Instead, Linklater's film plays upon the post-historical notion that nothing ever really changes, and that we have become stuck in an eternal present where political and economic alternatives are no longer available. In Linklater's own words: "So part of my point was this film, although the fashions and some of the things scream out '76, a lot of it screams out 1992, and a lot of it still screams out 2006. Some things never change—that was my point."

This sets Linklater's work very clearly apart from postmodernism's nostalgia mode of spectacle and pastiche. Comparing this film's ending with that of a classic nostalgia film such as *American Graffiti* brings home this point. George Lucas's popular tribute to the more innocent age of his teenage years famously finished with a pre-credits roundup of four of the main characters' later fates in life: the most innocent one a casualty of the Vietnam War, the one unwilling to take risks never leaving his hometown, and the one who made it out developing into a successful author. This important choice first offers evidence that the events portrayed in the film were crucial moments that ultimately defined many of these characters' further lives, while at the same time sealing off our involvement with it as a distant moment of lost glory. *Dazed and Confused*, on the other hand, ends much more ambiguously, with four randomly assorted characters

from the film heading out of town in pursuit of Aerosmith concert tickets. As the camera withdraws from the characters,² the ending suggests that the moments we have witnessed have no extraordinary narrative or symbolic significance, as no goals have been accomplished, nor have the characters made obviously life-changing decisions at any point.³ Instead, the characters' dialogue in the last scene is drowned out by the rock music soundtrack, and the film closes on an image of an open road at sunrise, stretching out before them.

While there is an incontrovertible symbolic optimism to this ambiguous ending, the events in the film make it impossible to read it as a purely romantic/nostalgic view of the future. First, the film has already acknowledged the fact that the 1980s would most definitely not be "radical" in the sense the characters hoped for, and that the future they are heading for is to be dominated by Reagan's neoconservative counterrevolution. But equally relevant here is the deliberate lack of closure the film's final shot expresses: it communicates above all Jameson's description of historicity as something that doesn't seal us off from our historical context, but that creates a present that is experienced *as* history, with ourselves as active agents within it.

At the same time, the film's open-ended and universalizing approach to historical periods runs afoul of another of Jameson's fundamental critiques of postmodernism. As Jameson famously wrote, the nostalgia film "registered its historicist deficiency by losing itself in mesmerized fascination with lavish images of specific generational pasts" (1991, 296). Linklater's post-nostalgic approach on the other hand unavoidably creates the illusion of a "perpetual present" that resonates strongly with global capitalism's post-historical spirit. In this sense, *Dazed and Confused* can be read not so much as a product of the cultural logic of *late* capitalism, but as an early expression of the cultural logic of *global* capitalism: our current era that many voices, from Francis Fukuyama to Slavoj Žižek, have described as "post-historical."

Linklater's *Before* films and the timeless time of capitalist realism

Approaching our current historical moment as an intensified continuation of what Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, David Harvey, and many others have associated explicitly with the post-Fordist transformations of capitalism, Linklater's status as a film auteur illustrates some of the key elements of global capitalism. Mark Fisher's term "capitalist realism" provides a concept that expresses a waning ability to imagine social, political, or cultural alternatives. Fisher frames this term specifically as an extension of Jameson's postmodernism in an era defined by its lack

of options, where “capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” (2009, 8). Linklater’s post-nostalgia therefore comes to resonate not only as a politically progressive response to postmodernism’s nostalgia mode, but at the same time also as an expression of capitalist realism’s post-historical mindset. If the marriage of convenience between neoconservative values and neoliberal economic practices defined the late capitalism of the 1980s, neoliberal global capitalism jettisons the nostalgia mode’s glorification of the past and moves instead toward the post-historical eradication of temporality.

In their grand theory of global capitalism, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri identify three fundamental characteristics of post-Fordist labor as flexible, mobile, and precarious: “*flexible* because workers have to adapt to different tasks, *mobile* because workers have to move frequently between jobs, and *precarious* because no contracts guarantee stable, long-term employment” (2000, 112). This transformation toward post-industrial capitalism affected the experience and representation of time, as just-in-time production systems and the exponential growth of information technology replaced the relative stability of the welfare state. These changing material practices express themselves in changing cultural dominants that articulate and negotiate the tensions and contradictions inherent in this new “post-historical” spirit of global capitalism.

From this perspective, Linklater’s experiments with cinematic representations of pastness and temporality resonate ambiguously with a newly emergent cultural logic that is specific to post-industrial capitalism. Manuel Castells has described the temporal effect of global capitalism as an experience of “timeless time”: “the eternal/ephemeral time of the new culture fits with the logic of flexible capitalism and with the dynamics of the network society” (2010, 493). For Castells, global capitalism’s network society is the product of complex shifts in technology, social relations, and the global restructuring of the capitalist order toward the end of the twentieth century. The combination of information technologies’ impact on production systems and the related financialization of all sectors of industry reshaped the world as a “space of flows,” where both space and time are increasingly experienced as virtual categories.⁴

The resulting tension between lived experience and increasingly ephemeral time is explored in Linklater’s *Before* Trilogy, a film cycle haunted by “the ghosts of older artworks about time” (Cutler 2013, 27) in which two characters engage in a precarious romance over the course of eighteen years. The first film, *Before Sunrise*, introduced American tourist Jesse (Ethan Hawke) and young Frenchwoman Céline (Julie Delpy), who spend a single impromptu night of romance in Vienna. As with Linklater’s previous two features, *Before Sunrise* registers the verbal interactions of educated and privileged young characters over the course of a short and clearly delimited period of time, employing a “workmanlike” and

unobtrusive visual aesthetic. Many have indeed pointed out how much the two main characters' articulate and self-conscious dialogue resembles similar exchanges in Linklater's previous "Generation X films" (Harrod 2010, 32), strengthening his perception as an emerging auteur figure with a recognizable writerly style and thematic preoccupations. And while the casual way in which this first film frames its picturesque locale resonates with globalization's emerging space of flows, its plot at the same time hinges on the spatial barriers the characters still experience.

While the sights and sounds of a deeply pleasurable and rather overbearingingly romanticized global city offer themselves up to the characters (and therefore the viewer) in ways that also typify global capitalism's space of flows, the narrative tension at the same time lies in a number of key spatio-temporal restrictions. The distance between Paris, France and Austin, Texas is experienced by both as overwhelmingly large, while Jesse's (economic) necessity of catching his flight home imposes a dramatically fortuitous deadline upon their developing relationship. Without soon-to-be-ubiquitous technologies like cell phones, the internet, and plummeting travel costs, the geography mapped out by the film remains largely defined by industrial capitalism's residual logic of rigid borders and stable structures. Viewed in isolation, *Before Sunrise* therefore consolidated Linklater's perception as an auteurist director, while dramatizing the tension between residual and emergent capitalist orders.

But when viewed as a cycle, the three films offer a vivid illustration of global capitalism's movement toward increased flexibility, mobility, and precariousness. *Before Sunset* reunites the two characters in Paris, where their dialogues reflect their generation's uncertainty about the life paths that seem available to them. The two of them now come to represent two distinct paths for young adults in advanced capitalist countries: where Jesse has attempted to reproduce traditions of stability and continuity by getting married and raising a family, Céline has resisted commitment and pursued her ideals. However, both feel equally frustrated and unsatisfied, while neither is able to pinpoint where their feelings of alienation come from. What has been described as the "wandering, searching, seemingly random aspect" of Linklater's work connects to the mindset of the first generation to come of age in global capitalism's post-historical atmosphere (Norton 1999, 62). As Jesse states, "Maybe what I'm saying is, the world might be evolving the way a person evolves. Right? Like, I mean, me for example. Am I getting worse? Am I improving? I don't know." Céline, who initially defends her more flexible lifestyle, ultimately concurs: "There are so many things I want to do, but I end up doing not much." What they have in common is their sense of a world with diminishing horizons, in which the collapse of history and ideology has created a stifling abundance of seemingly meaningless and interchangeable choices. And while the only solution the film is able to offer for their predicament lies in the appealing

concept of heterosexual romance, the ambiguity and tension in their interactions is fueled by what is ultimately an unresolvable tension that lies within the historical development of global capitalism's emergent structure of feeling.

Arriving another nine years later, *Before Midnight* adds a third picturesque location to the series' ongoing depiction of the global "space of flows," as Jesse and Céline now navigate the trials of a long-term relationship while vacationing in Greece. While the third film follows the basic structure of the previous two by focusing on the interaction between the two leads, there is also a larger cast of supporting characters around them in this third installment. The social group (including their children, friends, and a young couple all too obviously representing a millennial reflection of their younger selves) emphasizes the accumulation of social ties and personal responsibilities resulting from their decision to stay together after the end of the previous film. But while the earlier films foregrounded the spontaneous personal connection between two individuals on a momentary reprieve from the emergent post-historical, spatiotemporal logic of global capitalism, *Before Midnight* shows primarily how strongly this context of flexibility and mobility has challenged personal and social relations in the long term.

The growing resentment between Jesse and Céline is first articulated in a series of passive-aggressive exchanges with the circle of friends at their summer residence, emerging more fully once they retreat to a hotel room for a planned night of intimacy. In both environments, the reassuringly nostalgic familiarity between the two is constantly undercut by a pervasive atmosphere of insecurity and precariousness: the seemingly excessive choices on offer to this white, privileged couple is experienced as challenging and even toxic to their ongoing relationship. The quickly escalating tension between them therefore simultaneously expresses the network society's lack of stable and fixed coordinates. While the rhetoric of global capitalism's mandatory flexibility is generally presented as a liberation that allows for increased freedom of choice and individual development, these two characters' larger trajectory through three films illustrates the fundamental ambivalence of globalization: even for privileged subjects like Jesse and Céline, life in the ephemeral framework of Castells' "spaceless space" and "timeless time" appears stultifying rather than liberating.

At the same time, the film cycle's unique recursive format, as we return to these characters across substantial temporal gaps, strengthens this logic while developing an ambivalent form of nostalgia. Both for the audience and for the characters themselves, nostalgia in the *Before* films is not the desire to return to a particular time and place, as the ahistorical locales and "neutral" representational style refuses to resonate with any single

period in particular. Instead, the series becomes an elegy for the potentiality of youth and the smothering effects of the post-historical age. Céline's despair in *Before Midnight* in particular results from her inability to put into action her political ideals in a meaningful way, clearly exacerbated by Jesse's "common-sense" ideological pragmatism that trivializes and infantilizes her desire to contribute to real change. And since the films' form itself intensifies global capitalism's tendency to isolate the individual from a larger context of social relations, fascinatingly fixing both main characters in fleeting shared moments, it both inhabits and interrogates these limitations across the series.

Linklater's auteurist negotiation of global capitalism's post-historical spirit therefore offers a productive form of Jameson's provocative but undefined "post-nostalgia mode." While *Dazed and Confused* appears most obviously as a canny transformation of the neoconservative nostalgia film, the *Before* films operate in a Jamesonian "perpetual present" that may have been caught in amber, but which actively works against the rosy glow nostalgic perception could so easily cast upon it. When earlier films in the cycle are revisited, they offer neither stability nor reassurance. Instead, the passage of time leads both characters to question what came before, their constant doubt and ambiguity rendering palpable global capitalism's "purely *fungible* present in which space and psyches alike can be processed and remade at will" (Jameson 1998, 57). But even as the inexorable passage of global capitalism's timeless time continues to frustrate their desires, the trilogy as a whole still offers ways of negotiating the resulting impasse.

The final scene in the last film offers an elegant summation of this attempt to move beyond the straightforward absorption of capitalist realism. After the previous exchanges between Céline and Jesse seem to have broken down the remaining basis for their marriage and a separation now seems inevitable, the ending nevertheless offers a precarious and ambivalent comfort "through affirming the reality of a fantasy" (Cutler 2013, 28). By resorting to the shared ritual of role-playing, they are able to escape once more into an imagined world that is paradoxically more real than the fluid and flexible space of flows global capitalism has to offer. After listening to Jesse narrating a fictional version of their own post-nostalgic romance, Céline's last line perfectly sums up the confusing and deeply contradictory experience of timeless time: "Well, it must have been one hell of a night we're about to have." Rather than retreating from the present into an ossified past that offers the illusion of coherence, the *Before* films have the audacity to cling to a utopian sense of hope, offering an eternal promise of a different future (Speed 2007, 104–5).

Boyhood and global capitalism's war on time

In *Before Sunrise*, the first exchange between Jesse and Céline humorously describes an imaginary cable TV station. In the scene, Jesse pitches the idea for a channel that depicts an ordinary person's life for twenty-four hours without any cuts or elisions, literally "capturing life as it's lived." Against Céline's objections that nobody would be interested in watching "all those mundane, boring things everybody has to do every day of their fucking life," Jesse insists that the result would be "the poetry of everyday life." The exchange self-consciously sums up Linklater's observational approach to narrative filmmaking, which all too often resists the conventions of (post-)classical Hollywood, focusing instead on verbal interaction presented (more or less) in real time. This slowing down of time, practiced by Linklater in so many of his films, from *Slacker* to *A Scanner Darkly* (2006), allows for endless digressions that counter capitalism's relentless forward drive. Paul Virilio has equated the system's indefatigable necessity for speed and reinvention with a "war on Time" that only creates "peace through exhaustion" (2006, 69). Moving well beyond Jameson's critique of postmodern culture as a depoliticizing force, Virilio sees in contemporary film a "war machine" that fuels and exacerbates capitalism's military capture of daily life.

Jonathan Crary describes this war on time in the context of media convergence and the attention economy, relating the absence of temporal coordinates to global capitalism's 24/7 environment of precarious employment and on-demand delivery systems, as every waking moment is colonized by information technologies' multiplying forms of affective and immaterial labor. For subjects who are "constantly engaged, interfacing, interacting, communicating, responding, or processing within some telematic milieu" (2013, 15), there are hardly any interludes left that aren't over-determined by capitalism's boundless cycles of circulation. This constant engagement with information across media platforms eradicates historical difference, and results in the creation of a dangerous illusion of post-historical time: "an illuminated 24/7 world without shadows is the final capitalist mirage of post-history, of an exorcism of the otherness that is the motor of historical change" (2013, 9). With the slowing down of time and obsessive interest in alternate realities, much of Linklater's output—including *Dazed and Confused* and the *Before* films—resists this 24/7 logic without resorting to the nostalgia mode to keep its growing power at bay.

Arriving in theaters in 2014 following years of rumors and a triumphant tour of the festival circuit, *Boyhood* easily became a true indie blockbuster, crossing over on many occasions from smaller arthouse cinemas to larger commercial multiplexes. The film received unanimous critical acclaim,⁵ and its unique production history—re-assembling its cast and crew annually for

a few weeks over a twelve-year period—together with its thematic interest in the passage of time further cemented Linklater's established reputation as a twenty-first-century film auteur. But where *Slacker*, *Dazed and Confused*, *Waking Life*, and the *Before* Trilogy had explored his recurrent themes by focusing on single moments and the slowing down of time, *Boyhood* condenses a much longer period into a 166-minute feature film. The project brings together several of Linklater's thematic interests, such as the connection between temporality and identity, the blurring of boundaries between fiction and documentary filmmaking, and the exploration of youth culture and cross-generational connections.

Following main character Mason's development as actor Ellar Coltrane ages from six to eighteen years old, *Boyhood* rushes headlong through more than a decade of recent history. True to Linklater's established mode, this film again resists the nostalgia mode, neither romanticizing Mason's early childhood nor dwelling on changes in fashion or style that would create a clear sense of difference between past and present. While *Boyhood* was shot during the years in which the film industry transitioned from analog to digital, Linklater made the conscious choice to use 35mm film stock throughout, in order to allow for a consistent look and feel throughout the film (Rizov 2014). Instead, different haircuts for the main characters are used as the primary indicators of the passage of time, alongside the prominent use of popular music to signal temporal progression. While *Boyhood* clearly doesn't use these forms of narrative shorthand as ostentatiously as similarly organized historical pastiche films such as *Forrest Gump* (1994), its relentless forward movement nevertheless tends to reproduce a similar cultural logic.

The most remarkable aspect of the film's twelve-year timespan is how little actually seems to change outside of the personal sphere. *Boyhood's* appeal clearly derives from the tension between the time-lapse effect of childhood and adolescence framed against a historical background that remains strangely static. Indeed, the film's condensation of twelve years into just under three hours of cinema provides an unusual encounter with the visible passage of time in our cultural context of ephemeral timelessness. Media attention on the film has therefore predictably focused on this uncanny spectacle, with many magazine covers and photo spreads combining images of Coltrane at various ages. And in the context of contemporary American film culture, marked above all by remakes, prequels, franchise reboots, re-imaginings, adaptations, and other forms of rapid cultural recycling, it comes as little surprise that a visual confrontation with time's implacable forward movement has been experienced by so many as unusually meaningful.

Besides the recognizable pop hits signaling the passage of time, historical markers in the film arrive mainly in the form of media events, like the publication of the latest Harry Potter book. And while occasional discussions of

the Iraq War and Obama's presidential campaign offer tokenistic indications of the director's publicly declared liberal political sensibilities, the pervasive mood is one that remains thoroughly "post-ideological" (Žižek 2012, 54–5). It is revealing that the only fundamental change we witness in passing during *Boyhood*'s twelve-year period is the rise of information technology—from the first Apple iMac popping up in Mason's classroom, to family members making everyday Skype and FaceTime calls on iPhones and laptop computers. The simultaneous rise of social media is commented on in the film with terms very similar to those Castells uses to describe and critique global capitalism's network society. On his way to a visit with his sister in Austin, a sixteen-year-old Mason expresses his frustration over the ubiquity of Facebook and social media to his girlfriend Sheena, as she interacts with her smartphone:

Mason: "I just want to try and not live my life through a screen, you know. Have, like, some kind of actual interaction. A real person, not just the profile they put up."

Sheena: "Oh, I'm sorry, were you saying something?"

Mason: "Yeah, okay, I know you're joking. But it's kind of true: you have been checking your phone this whole time. So what do you really do? You don't care what your friends are up to on a Saturday afternoon. But you're also not fully experiencing my profound bitching. It's like everyone's just stuck in an in-between state—not really experiencing anything."

This constant "in-between state" is precisely the result of global capitalism's post-historical atmosphere, in which Mason's desire to "not live his life through a screen" is rendered fascinatingly ambiguous. While at one level the experience of *Boyhood* tries to capture the very sense of authentic "reality" that seems to be absent from global capitalism's "ontological lack" (Hardt and Negri 2005, 62), it simultaneously loses those aspects of resistance that make Linklater's other films politically productive. In this sense, the *Before* films and *Boyhood* mobilize distinctly opposite interpretations of "timeless time": the moments between Jesse and Céline take place outside the regular flow of history, and focus insistently on play-acting, imagined alternatives, and "what if" scenarios. They show characters struggling to break away from the "space of flows" that has paradoxically made possible their encounters. *Boyhood* on the other hand is steeped in a more literal timeless time, rendering the forward movement of time spectacular without interrogating or historicizing it in any meaningful way. Or, to put it somewhat differently: while time's absence is experienced as a trauma in the *Before* cycle, its visible presence in *Boyhood* has the opposite effect, and becomes pacifying and reassuring.

While audiences have clearly responded strongly to the temporal spectacle

that *Boyhood's* high concept provides, the irony is of course that it is at a deeper level simply another screen competing for our time in this attention economy. In this context of timeless time and the nonstop barrage of media content, *Boyhood's* affective power can be read both as a symptom of global capitalism's timeless time, and as the public's reaction against it: on the one hand, the desire to experience time as something more organic, less ephemeral; but on the other, the discovery that the post-historical subject may in fact be even more powerless to resist the sense that the passage of time in the neoliberal age has become meaningless beyond the purely individual level.

From this perspective, Virilio's "war on Time" offers a suitably hyperbolic intensification of Jameson's long-standing critique of late capitalism's cultural dominant. While both see the representation of history and pastness as crucial to understanding capitalism's cultural logic, Virilio's perspective aligns itself perfectly with critical concepts like "timeless time" and "capitalist realism." As a text, *Boyhood* lends itself to a reading that foregrounds the emergent spirit of global capitalism, with its emphasis on flexibility, precariousness, and immaterial labor as positive, liberating concepts. And as a cultural phenomenon, it resonates even more strongly, positioning Linklater's status as an innovative and thematically consistent auteur as an expression of successful entrepreneurialism, while thematizing the key notions supporting global capitalism's post-historical atmosphere.

Conclusion

Whereas *Dazed and Confused* resisted nostalgia by emphasizing how nothing ever really changes, and the *Before* cycle sought ways to escape for a moment into (imagined and real) alternatives, *Boyhood* embraces the logic of global capitalism: the passage of twelve years demonstrates change and transformation, but almost entirely in the personal sphere. The callous and unreliable father (played by Ethan Hawke) matures into a bourgeois family man; the mother (played by Patricia Arquette) survives a series of abusive relationships and precarious academic jobs, ultimately finding validation from a Mexican immigrant whose life she has turned around;⁶ and Mason himself experiences first love, heartbreak, the discovery of a creative vocation, and a moment of true epiphany as he comes of age with the realization that we are all in fact condemned to exist in a perpetual present.

At the same time, Linklater's ability to develop a career as an American film director whose auteurism has been established across a range of genres, styles, and industrial contexts illustrates how the film industry has changed along similar lines. While twentieth-century perceptions would make clear distinctions between studio work and independent productions,

Linklater's successful auteurism reflects global capitalism's entrepreneurial individualism. In this post-historical context of evaporating boundaries and just-in-time production systems, every individual is forced to become an "entrepreneur of the self" (Lazzarato 2012, 94). In this sense at least, Linklater's ambiguous status as a twenty-first-century American film auteur offers one of the most provocative illustrations of neoliberalism's inescapable logic.

Notes

- 1 The trilogy also illustrates a range of industrial production frameworks: *Before Sunrise* was a major studio film, financed and distributed by Columbia Pictures; *Before Sunset* was produced by Time Warner's boutique label Warner Independent Pictures; and *Before Midnight* was financed independently, securing a distribution deal with Sony Pictures only after screening at the Sundance Film Festival.
- 2 The striking use of a single helicopter shot in this low-budget film emphasizes the ending's symbolic importance.
- 3 The only thing resembling a "life choice" is Pink's decision not to sign a form that confirms his commitment to the football team in his senior year. But even this choice leaves open how this will affect his later life, and therefore again reinforces the film's narrative ambiguity.
- 4 Similarly, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello emphasize the networked nature of entrepreneurial management as a fundamental aspect of the new spirit of capitalism (2007, 103–8).
- 5 Review aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes* indicates that 98 percent of the published responses from film critics were favorable.
- 6 In spite of what seem like progressive politics, the implausible subplot concerning the Mexican immigrant speaks volumes about the film's ideological investment, finding the solution to social and economic problems in liberal humanist values of individual encouragement and voluntary assistance.

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