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By Mark Fisher

Forget the year 2000, the Mbug is already upon us. If you thought Michael J. Fox was just a figment of the silver screen you'd better think again – this time we really are going back to the future. Forget what all those postmodernists told you about the arbitrariness of the sign, this time the nought means business. Confused? Why not let Mark Fisher upgrade your theory chip for the Y2K. When was that again...?

[IMAGE]

Within the course of a year, Y2K has passed from being a non-event to being, briefly, a scare story (complete with a government awareness campaign) to being a taken-for-granted commonplace.

Curiously, but perhaps predictably, 'cyber-culture' has had little to say about Y2K. Most commentary on Y2K has treated it as simply a technical glitch to be eradicated, the trigger for an empirical event that may or may not happen come January 1st. Treating Y2K positively, as a cultural event involving semiotics and calendrics, gives a somewhat different picture, one offering a way of radically rethinking the last half century of computing culture. Here, Y2K appears not as an accident but as a fated occurrence.

Y2K plugs into the fears that have haunted Science Fiction since its inception, confirming anxieties that, as technological integration increases, human control lessens, and the possibility of something crashing the entire system grows. Here, SF disintegrates into cyberpunk. Where Science Fiction can be defined as the implementation of the project of Progressive Technology – a vision of uninhibited technological growth spreading out into a far future that has been speculatively planned – cyberpunk lurks in the near future, building itself out of the unanticipated consequences of technical development. It is essentially improvisational, feeding on glitches, interference and coincidences: as the runaway AI Wintermute tells Case in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, "planning's not my thing."

In the Terminator mythos, the megacomputer Skynet begins its assault on Human Security at the moment it switches into sentience. In Terminator's anthropomorphic and moral vision, it was still necessary to posit some malign will on the part of machines. But Mbug is spreading without will, planning or sense of purpose on the part of the machines which carry it. Far from there being any deviation from human control, it is the very 'literal-mindedness' of machines in their execution of human commands that has produced Y2K. In the 1950s, Norbert Wiener, the founder of cybernetics, warned of the demonic dangers of this literal-mindedness. Referring to the stories of "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" and "The Monkey's Paw," Wiener compared modern cybernetic machines to genies and other magical beings who follow their instructions to the letter, and only to the letter. Give ourselves over to the machines, Wiener counselled, and they will likely as not give us exactly what we asked for; but what we asked for may not be what we wanted, nor what we expected. In "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," famously, a factotum seeks magical assistance with his domestic chores; but when the chores are complete the magical labour-saving devices continue their work and the apprentice, ignorant of the spell that would tell them to stop, is left helpless as chaos ensues. In "The Monkey's Paw", a poor family wish for money, which they duly receive – but with tragic costs. The money, it turns out, is in the form of an insurance payment for their son, who has died in an accident. For Wiener, the point of these stories is that technical machines do not possess any capacity for interpretation. They operate on code, not signifiers. And, in a delicious irony, Wiener was already too late: Y2K was already in place when Wiener wrote his words of warning.

[IMAGE]

>> All illustrations by Laura Bangert

SF conceives of machines in terms of human use-value, thinking of them as (temporarily troublesome) tools with which humanity is ultimately destined to be reconciled. The famous jump-cut in Kubrick's 2001 – from caveman's primitive weapon to gleaming space vehicle – gives you a handy summary of the Science Fictional version of history. From the point of view of Y2K, of course, 2001 never happens. It is almost as if the popular Unconscious and Y2K have colluded in the elimination of any date after 1999. In the early to mid 90s, when Y2K began to emerge as a problem, the year 2000 still seemed as far distant as it did in the 1950s, when programmers agreed upon the two-digit date protocol. In the popular Unconscious, the year 2000 and beyond belong to the far distant time of Science Fiction – with the ironic effect that SF's long-term has suddenly collapsed into cyberpunk's near future.

Y2K confirms all the darkside prophecies of Marx, Wiener and McLuhan, all of whom saw that, far from being a relation between tools and their users, machine culture involves human and technical components in a total mesh. Here, 'technology' – if such a reification makes sense any more – is not a tool, it is an environment. And it seems that we are only now coming to fitful awareness of that environment because of Mbug. The shadow showing up the diseased organ. Any attempt to think through the potential limits of Mbug infection is also, effectively, an attempt to map human dependence upon the technical environment. The more humans take computers – and computerisation – for granted, the more they are dependent upon them. In a prescient parable, McLuhan said that the one thing fish don't see is water, just as the one thing humans are unaware of is the technical environment from which they are increasingly inextricable. Now, as the hunt to find and eliminate potential carriers of Mbug is well underway, human beings, like fish forewarned of a viral infection in the water supply, are beginning to be aware of the extent of their immersion in the electrocybernetic Matrix.

Y2K is not only everywhere computers are, but it is also everywhere silicon chips are: it is a molecular bug, infecting even the tiniest interstices of the technical environment, an invisible invader into technical systems that have themselves tended to shrink out of human sight. It is a global problem that can only be tackled locally. Even if, say, airlines do manage to root out all their Mbug infections, they are still dependent upon agencies who may not have been so successful in debugging their systems. So Y2K is not so much a catastrophe as a hypercatastrophe. Y2K-os can be extrapolated from any number of contingencies and their potential interexcitations: traffic failure, food shortages, ATM malfunction, stock market crashes, exchange of nuclear weapons – anything that is dependent upon chips is potentially infected with Mbug. Which is bad news for us, who are symbiotically intertwined with them.

Back in the 1960s, McLuhan warned that the trauma of total machinic dependence had brought about an anaesthetised, somnambulant response in a human population whose nervous system was incapable of processing the enormity of the future shock it was undergoing. What has been called postmodernity is one symptom of this psychopathology of cybernetic life. 'Postmodernity' is a powerful narcotic, screening out anything potentially catastrophic with its deep conviction that nothing could ever happen. The dominance of this type of thinking is such that it can be simultaneously asserted both that nothing will happen in the Year 2000 and that Y2K is imminent.

This kind of sleepwalking complacency once contributed to Y2K; now Mbug also feeds on the opposite, but complementary, state: panic. Anti-Y2K activity must now walk the precarious line between the two. Too little awareness and you risk slipping, unwittingly, into total social collapse; too much, and you end up in the same state. Security response is radically compromised by the nature of

panic dynamics. Panic about Y2K – leading to mass withdrawal of money from banks or looting – could be as dangerous as any actual computer failure. Y2K? There are any number of reasons – including the prospect of panic, which feeds, voraciously, on itself.

It's ironic that Y2K should loom into view just as cyberhype begins to fade, since Y2K not only fully justifies all the cyber-hype, but is also an event largely constituted from hype. It is only pre-cybernetic nostalgia that could think of hype as something merely illusory; like panic, which it parallels and bleeds into, hype is an immediately effective cybernetic process, operating by intense feedback spirals. Hype and panic cannot simply be thought of as precursors to events: they are the event already happening. So it's not a matter of waiting for Y2K. As a potential, it's already active. Even if not one computer malfunctions on New Year's Day, Mbug has already been a major disaster for capitalism, of an unprecedented scale (estimates of the cost of Y2K to date run into trillions of dollars.) Y2K is the most spectacular example yet of the way in which capitalist reality is indistinguishable from fiction: in capital's world of simulation and cybernetic anticipation, all that is solid has melted into the abstract and virtual. Which is not to subscribe to some melancholy postmodern story about derealisation so much as to point to ways in which virtual agencies – such as potentials – have the most material effect imaginable.

Cyberpunk begins with Y2K, but when does Y2K begin? Y2K transforms the dynamics of chaos theory into the logic of fatality. At one level, you couldn't be more precise about when Y2K will happen; at another, it's a massively distributed event, involving the whole century. You could date Y2K at the point, in the 1950s, when the 2-digit protocol was put in place, or at any point since, when the decision to modify it was not taken. As with any fatal loop, ironies abound. It was the military forerunner of the internet, ARPANET, that established the 2-digit dating system. Now, with the Cold War ended, the biggest threat to western security may be a – literal – time-bomb planted by the US military itself some forty years ago.

When *The Economist* questioned last year whether “two digits can really mean the end of civilisation,” it expressed what is a widespread inability to come to terms with the real and effective (not merely signifying or representational) power of signs in cybernetic culture. Y2K is a semiotic event, but it does not belong to postmodernity's regime of signs. Rather, Y2K signals the virtual termination of PoMo. The widespread failure of a PoMo-saturated academy to offer any effective response to Y2K (or any sort of response at all) is testament to the bankruptcy of its theoretical commitments. It was one thing for out-of-touch theorists to fail to anticipate the events of 1968; but to be unable to respond to Y2K – an event which we not only know will happen, but also when – is an oversight of another magnitude entirely.

The problem is that Y2K scrambles the PoMo radar, discomfiting the by now cosy set of assumptions on which much thinking about postmodernism rests. Y2K is culturally-generated, but it does not belong to 'discourse'; it is a disaster, but it is entirely 'unnatural'. The notion of cultural construction to which PoMo is so attached has always carried with it the implicit idea that what has been constructed can be taken apart again. The assumption belongs to a pre-cybernetic opposition between Nature (as the realm of the given) and Culture (as the province of the mutable) that Y2K – like the cybernetic capitalism which has incubated it – is effectively dismantling. Y2K is no less of a catastrophe, and no less ineradicable, because it is totally artificial.

Against the PoMo dictum that signs are arbitrary (and therefore effectively interchangeable), Y2K promises that global disaster could be precipitated by a specific semiotic trigger. When next some media pundit yawns about the Year 2000 being an arbitrary date, reflect on the fact that Y2K is happening not on a date, but because of a date. At no other point in history have semiotic dating practices themselves caused a catastrophe: when people looked to the skies in trepidation in 999, they

didn't imagine that the date itself would bring calamity. But with Y2K, the event is the date. Things click together on the machinic unconscious just as they fall apart at the human level. At the moment of Y2K, the twodigit convention converges the date with the time: 99 becomes 00 at 00:00 hours precisely. This string of noughts should give pause to PoMo relativists who insists that any sign will do; it is the very precise function of zero that allows Y2K to happen as (and when) it does, effecting a collision of the Hindu-Arab numeric system with Roman numerals. Although ostensibly translated into Hindu-Arab numerals, the Gregorian calendar still effectively runs on a Roman numeric system ignorant of zero. Y2K ciphers what will not happen in undebugged cyberspace: the Gregorian Year 2000 (making literal Baudrillard's prophecies that the year 2000 will not happen, and that the 20th century is being erased.) Skipping SF's 2000 AD, computers will cyberpunk the date, counting what the Gregorian calendar never has: zero. The effect is a calendric revolution carried out entirely by the machinic Unconscious. Unravelling the virtual computer calendar is complicated.

When is Y2K's year zero: the Gregorian year 2000, or Gregorian year 1900? Both are candidates, since, in addition to treating January 1st '2000' as year zero, the implicit computer calendar has retrospectively coded January 1st '1900' as its start-date. At the level of the Unconscious, anyone logging onto a computer has been in complicity with the computer-calendar. And, on the darkside of the Net, news has broken of 00-cults dedicated to the computer-generated calendric system...

At the Great Midnight at the century's end, signifying culture will flip over into a numberbased counter-culture, retroprocessing the last 100 years. Whether global disaster ensues or not, Y2K is a singularity for cybernetic culture. It's time to get Y2K positive.

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