

Mark Fisher in Memoriam, Part 1: Capitalist Realism and Beyond

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When discussing the project of his that began with his k-punk blog around 2003 and reached a major audience with the publication of *Capitalist Realism* in 2009, Mark Fisher liked to characterise it as a project of negativity as opposed to pessimism. For whereas pessimism often comes down to seeing bad things where there are none, negativity, on the other hand, is about explicating structures, attitudes and beliefs that already are present but that tend to be transparent or even disavowed. In this sense, Mark's recent work was about pinpointing what he called 'the inherent negativity of our times' and the conditions that imposed this situation upon us. That is, the conditions of capitalist realism – whose negative effects Mark examined in brilliant detail in art, culture, politics, psychology, and so on. But to understand this negativity better, it is necessary to first take a step back and examine its wider historical underpinnings – for it is only then that we will be able to get the full scope of Mark's work and the trajectory in which capitalist realism should be situated. So, in what follows, I will aim to do so chronologically through what I take to be five concepts central to his project: popular modernism, capitalist realism, aggravated postmodernism, hauntology and accelerationism.

Born in 1968, Mark was part of a prominent generation of British thinkers – also including Simon Reynolds, Kodwo Eshun and Steve Goodman (aka Kode9), among others – who grew up in and were formed by the vibrant culture of post-war Britain. When describing the years of his cultural coming to consciousness, Mark often spoke enthusiastically about phenomena such as public television that would broadcast hour-long conversations with philosophers, a music press where he would first encounter names such as 'Baudrillard' and 'Derrida', a flourishing paperback culture for both fiction and theory books, and music cultures such as post-punk and rave that both challenged not only previous conceptions of what rock and electronic music could be – but our understanding of music as such. Altogether, these cultural phenomena formed a cultural ecology where theoretical concepts circulated in popular mediums and where popular forms were experimented with and transformed into something genuinely new. In that regard, Mark's coining of the concept 'popular modernism' is as simple as it is brilliant in that it compellingly pinpoints this virtual trajectory that cut across British and other post-

war cultures, and in which the modernist impetus to innovate and experiment flourished in numerous popular forms and in that way effectively challenged the high modernist idea of popular culture as nothing but a factory for the production of standardised cultural products. Crucial here was also the explication of the necessary link – as opposed to gulf – between modernist and identity experimentation in various minority cultures (e.g. in Afrofuturism and techno-feminism), and the visions of utopian futures that fuelled these cultures. Through popular modernism, the population was exposed to brief but lasting glimpses of alien futures that promised to be radically different from the present, and of visions of a transformative humanism where encounters with the alien outside promised to once and for all obliterate the tired and fictive axiom of the white male.

Yet all of this changed around 2000, when the hegemony of capitalist realism really hit the UK hard. It is not that these tendencies had not been present in previous decades – they certainly had, and Mark indeed often pointed to Fredric Jameson's work on postmodernism as an early theory of what was to become capitalist realism. But the difference between Mark's and Jameson's work is that Jameson still theorised postmodernism and its late capitalist counterpart in relation to other cultural and political systems. But this is no longer possible today, following the election of Thatcher and Reagan and the end of the Soviet system, which effectively marked the end of any political alternatives to capitalism. As Mark put it, whereas there still is a residual conflict between (for instance) modernism and postmodernism present in Jameson's work, his point is that today there is only capitalist realism. Postmodernism, as he liked to put it, has been naturalised similarly to how Thatcher's famous claim that 'there is no alternative' to capitalism has gone from being a preferential statement to something more like an ontological statement following relentless privatisation, increased precarity and what Mark refers to as 'business ontology': the idea that everything in society should be run like a business (including public education, healthcare, and so on).

Capitalist realism is thus more than a politico-economical system. It is also an atmosphere or a silent belief that nothing will ever change for the better, which gradually has come to narrow the individual and collective imagination and expresses itself in the form of so-called 'reflexive impotence': Why should we care when everything will only be getting worse anyway? This sentiment is typical of the negativity that Mark's work aims to explicate – yet he was also quick in pointing out that we must keep in mind that things do not need to be this way. As he usefully hints at in *Capitalist Realism*, whereas much of neoliberalism's success comes down to the fact that it has managed to sell us its own paltry version of reality as the ultimate truth, re-

ality is – on the contrary – never given once and for all, but is rather a *mutable* or *plastic* medium. This was indeed another crucial component of post-war popular modernism: the augmentation of our understanding of and expectations from reality through art and culture, which expanded people's ambitions and ideas of what the future may be like. In contrast, capitalist realism has gradually narrowed our experience of reality to a state of absolute exhaustion – indeed, to the point where the future no longer seems possible. It is thus crucial for us to locate the cracks and inconsistencies that inevitably are part of any kind of hegemonic system – even that of late capitalism – and expose the mechanisms behind them in order to begin challenging the dreary realism implemented by late capitalism.

One such inconsistency – discussed at length by Mark throughout his writings – is that of mental health. Drawing upon his personal experiences with depression, his work at a Further Education College with an overabundance of depressed teenagers, empirical data covering the rise of depression in Britain, and the work of theorists such as Franco Berardi and David Smail, one of Mark's most crucial theoretical contributions was his understanding of the socio-political causation of depression. Against the psychoanalytic habit to locate the root-sources to mental pathologies in childhood – and against CBT's (Cognitive Behavioural Theory) tendency to merely aim to replace bad beliefs with good ones – for Mark the key to understanding and overcoming the pandemic of depression particularly among young people takes the form of an externalisation of negativity: the problem is not internal (even though it expresses itself in this way), but *external* in that the horrible conditions of living and growing up under capitalist realism – and constantly having to worry about employment, income, social security, and so on, while rushing between short-term jobs and not believing that anything will ever change – must be understood as the root-source to the worthlessness and hopelessness that Mark so powerfully communicated in his writings and that made him somewhat of a spokesperson also for younger generations growing up under capitalist realism.¹ Or, as Berardi argues: depression, anxiety and other mental pathologies all index the depletion of cognitive resources in late capitalism similarly to the depletion of natural resources in industrial capitalism – and cannot simply be overcome by shaking things off and moving on, as capitalist realist popular culture often suggests in terms of what Smail brilliantly calls 'magical voluntarism': the idea that we can all become whatever we want to be if we just put enough effort into it. So, overcoming this fatal strategy of *responsibilisation* – that is, neoliberalism's method for tricking us into believing that we alone are responsible for all our problems – is crucial for challenging the hegemony of capitalist realism. One way of beginning to do this is to rediscover collective organisation and

action. In a world where we often feel increasingly overworked, stressed and isolated because of the capitalist ruling over work and technology – and the complete dissolution between work and leisure time that goes with it – coming together collectively and rediscovering our personal and collective value indeed needs to be a crucial starting-point for improving our mental health and social and political lives. Mark did indeed think in these terms as well. Inspired by the anti-capitalist organisation Plan C, he more recently began talking about consciousness-raising as a viable political strategy. Historically rooted in the struggles of various minority-cultures – women, black, gay, and so on – this strategy both served to educate participants about the power-structures they were embedded in, and to overcome their sense of personal alienation through collective empowerment. It is in this sense that the strategy of consciousness-raising could be mobilised against the responsabilisation and socio-political causation of depression deployed by late capitalism, because – as Mark’s friend and sometimes collaborator Jeremy Gilbert argues – the political value of consciousness-raising is precisely its collectivity and the realisation that personal problems are in fact effects of larger socio-political structures – and that the way to actually challenge these structures are through collective organisation rather than mere individual action.²

Another such inconsistency – also crucial to Mark – is that of cultural stagnation. Whereas post-war popular modernism, as we just saw, was driven by utopian visions of alien futures, what is distinctive of popular culture under late capitalism – again, as Jameson correctly predicted in his work on postmodernism – is its inability to act as anything but a reflection of late capitalist reality through a naturalisation of pastiche and retrospection. When Mark spoke of his early experiences of rave culture – jungle in particular – he liked to describe it as a feeling of a ‘future shock’: the future rushing in and fundamentally altering the conditions of the present. Yet this is completely absent from popular culture under capitalist realism, which instead is characterised by an obsession with the near past through constant cultural recycling. Mark’s point here is not that all forms of culture under late capitalism are bad, but rather that there is very little – if anything – *genuinely new*; that is, cultural material capable of producing the same kinds of future shocks as rave and previous forms of post-war popular modernisms. Instead, what is distinctive of popular culture today is a kind of ‘formal nostalgia’: the seemingly endless recycling of previous cultural forms within a digital hi-tech environment. For Mark, nowhere in popular culture is this more evident than in music, as he puts it in a particularly poignant passage in his book *Ghosts of My Life* from 2014:

Imagine any record released in the past couple of years being beamed back in time to, say, 1995 and played on the radio. It's hard to think that it will produce any jolt in the listeners. On the contrary, what would be likely to shock our 1995 audience would be the very recognisability of the sounds: would music really have changed so little in the next 17 years? Contrast this with the rapid turnover of styles between the 1960s and the 90s: play a jungle record from 1993 to someone in 1989 and it would have sounded like something so new that it would have challenged them to rethink what music was, or could be. While 20th-century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion.³

But there is even more to this cultural deceleration, since the past conveyed in a culture of formal nostalgia is not the actual past, but a simulated past that emerges precisely when digital technology is being utilised in cultural recycling. For the cultural clash between an unacknowledged, formal attachment to the past and the utilisation of high-definition digital technology for articulating it means that the cultural material itself ends up belonging neither in the past nor in the present, but in what Fisher and Jameson both refer to as some kind of glossily simulated, eternal 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, and so on. The major symptom of formal nostalgia is therefore a temporal flatness in which real history has been transformed into pseudo-history because of our inability to experience historical time organically and to organise it into a coherent sequence of past-present-future. This is Jameson's 'waning of historicity' at full force, in the form of an aggravated postmodernism where 'retro' no longer designates a particular kind of culture but instead has become the *modus operandi* of popular culture as such (what Simon Reynolds has named 'retromania').⁴

Hence Mark's repurposing of Derrida's concept of 'hauntology' – here understood in terms of how our dreary present is being haunted not so much by the past, but rather by the *past futures* of popular modernism that never actually materialised yet still linger in the collective imagination as spectral reminders of what culture once was and could have been. This articulated itself particularly in the work of a number of primarily British musicians in the mid-00s (such as Burial and The Caretaker), who all converged around so-called 'hauntological music' (a concept coined by Mark and Simon Reynolds) that aimed to invoke these lost futures by saturating post-war popular modernist sounds in hazes of reverb, hiss and crackle in order to

explicate their spectral qualities in the present. In that regard, hauntology is also congruent with a certain kind of nostalgia – although not the formal nostalgia of postmodernism, but rather nostalgia for the past futures that capitalist realism has done its best to erase from the collective imagination. In that regard, as Mark has pointed out, the difference between formal nostalgia and nostalgia for past futures is that the latter explicates the temporal anachronisms that remain unacknowledged in the former, and in that regard keeps reminding us that there is a different world beyond the dead-end of capitalist realism.

Aesthetic experimentation is obviously crucial for overcoming this dead-end, but what is equally important is to rebuild the cultural ecologies of post-war popular modernism but geared towards today's digital environment. Because one of the reasons why analogue popular modernism enjoyed such prominence over such a great length of time was because there were enough social channels and structures to support it: free art-schools, squatting and cheap housing, publishing networks, pirate radio, and so on. So how to revitalise this vibrant sociocultural infrastructure at the digital present – when most of these previous cultural resources have been eliminated by capitalist realism – is another important way to challenge the reality imposed by late capitalism and prompt us to demand others instead.

I think that issues such as these are what Mark's work most fundamentally poses, and challenges us to address. It has thus come to be the task of a generation of younger thinkers – many inspired by Mark – to take on this challenge from a slightly different perspective. Here it is worth mentioning Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' ambitious demand for a post-work world liberated by full automation,⁵ the collective Laboria Cuboniks' Xenofeminist fusion of technology and gender-augmentation,⁶ the design theorist Benedict Singleton's visions of space exploration,⁷ and Mark's long-time friend Ray Brassier's ambition to rehabilitate Prometheism as a viable philosophical program (that is, the idea that there is no pre-determined limit or divine blueprint to what we humans can achieve and make of ourselves).⁸ First emerging publicly in the blogosphere and (in particular) at a 2010-conference in London, these series of overlapping ideas soon came to be known as 'left accelerationism'.⁹ The term itself has since become somewhat fuzzy and unclear because of the plethora of different thinkers associated with it, but the most basic sentiment of accelerationism – the idea that capitalism should be accelerated rather than rejected because it sets in motion numerous processes (scientific, technological, social, etc.) that, if utilised for the purposes of human rather than economic development, would have immensely productive consequences for the whole of mankind – remains a crucial strategy for the contemporary left. Not because we should uncritically accept everything that

capitalism is trying to sell us, but rather because the left needs to recognise that it is operating with an increasingly outdated set of cultural and political resources that are inadequate for challenging the global hegemony of capitalist realism and for imagining a world fundamentally different from the present one. What is necessary instead, as Srnicek and Williams argue, is a left at ease with technology, science, complexity and abstraction: a more modern left capable of delivering beyond the failure of neoliberal modernisation and of remaking late capitalist society for the purposes of building a post-work, post-capitalist world.

While sympathetic to these ideas, Mark never got the time to write about them extensively. But he certainly intended to, and at the time of his death he was working on a manuscript on post-capitalist desire entitled *Acid Communism*, that – as far as I know – was to engage with these ideas against the backdrop of the 60s counterculture, and was based on drafts of earlier manuscripts that he had been working on for several years. Sadly, this is a book that we now never will get the chance to read, but it is possible to extract early versions of what probably would have been some of its central arguments from some of Mark's many published articles. For example, in a 2012-text entitled 'Post-Capitalist Desire', Mark criticises the prevailing leftist tendency to take the desire for things like technology, branding, non-places and synthetic food as synonymous with a desire for capital. Sure, the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism has been synonymous with a radical intensification of desire on the part of capitalism, yet Mark's point here – following philosophers of desire such as Deleuze and Guattari – is that the way to overcome this is not by turning our backs against desire in the form of some archaic primitivism, but rather to emancipate it from its flimsy deployment by capitalism and recognise it as an active inorganic force that constantly defies homeostasis.¹⁰ Hence, the ultimate upshot of this for Mark would be a world where artifice and technology are fully integrated into everyday life as part of an alternative public sphere beyond state centralisation, and where individual and collective 'technologies of the self' (to use Foucault's formulation) would be deployed for the purposes of the expansion and remaking of human consciousness.

The question of an alternative public sphere was something that occupied much of Mark's thinking; for, as we saw earlier, it was precisely such a public sphere that fuelled the success of post-war popular modernism, but then slowly was obliterated by capitalist privatisation and technological domination. This trajectory was something that Mark dedicated his life to subverting; not just in his writings, but also in the way that he published his work (he very rarely published in academic journals because of his frustration with their lack of circulation beyond closed academic circles), his engagement with political organisations and the art world, his

blogging and his central role in the success of the Zero Books-imprint (that later became Repeater) – which still publishes books at the intersection between the intellectual and the popular in the style of popular modernism. It was indeed interesting to note after his passing how many of the authors on Zero/Repeater came out and said that their books would not have existed if it had not been for Mark. Yet despite his massive success as a theorist, a public figure, and as a human being, Mark always saw himself as an outsider – even after landing his first full-time academic position at Goldsmiths University and *Capitalist Realism* selling over 20,000 copies – and ultimately ended up losing his lifelong struggle against depression. Beyond the immense human tragedy of this, it also saturates his short but compelling authorship with even more melancholy and ghostly hauntings than what already was present in the texts themselves, and solidifies the image of the popular modernist subject as part of a dying breed of intellectuals under the ruthless hegemony of capitalist realism. But to end on the same note as where I started: here we need to differentiate between pessimism and negativity, insofar as the worst thing that we can do now is to fall into widespread pessimism. Rather, we need to mobilise negativity by recognising the many problems in our world and invent various tactics and strategies for overcoming them. For as long as we continue to believe in the possibilities for a different world, then Mark will always be with us.

Notes

1. See for example Fisher, M. (2014) 'Good for Nothing', <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=12841>
2. See Gilbert, J. (2017) 'Psychedelic Socialism: The Politics of Consciousness, the Legacy of the Counterculture and the Future of the Left', <https://jeremygilbertwriting.files.wordpress.com/2017/09/psychedelic-socialism2.pdf>
3. Fisher, M. (2014) *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books), p. 7-8.
4. See Reynolds, S. (2012) *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber and Faber).
5. See Srnicek, N. and Williams, A. (2015) *Inventing the Future: Folk Politics and the Left* (London: Verso Books).
6. See Laboria Cuboniks (2015) 'Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation', http://www.laboriacuboniks.net/20150612-xf_layout_web.pdf
7. See Singleton, B. (2014) 'Maximum Jailbreak', in Avanesian, A. and Mackay, R., eds., *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth: Urbanomic), p. 489-507.
8. See Brassier, R. (2014) 'Prometheanism and Its Critics', in Avanesian, A. and Mackay, R., eds., *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth: Urbanomic), p. 467-487.

9. For a comprehensive overview of left accelerationism, see Avanesian, A. and Mackay, R., eds. (2014) *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth: Urbanomic).
10. See Fisher, M. (2012) 'Post-Capitalist Desire', in ed., Campagna, F. and Campiglio, E., *What Are We Fighting For: A Radical Collective Manifesto* (Pluto Press, 2012),
<https://fisherfunction.persona.co/WEEK-ONE>

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