

K-PUNK AT LARGE

MARK FISHER, the English writer and cultural critic, is still perhaps best known for his trenchant first book, *Capitalist Realism* (2009).^{*} The maiden title of an insurgent publisher, it was an unexpected success upon publication, translated into several languages. Its excoriation of the shrunken imaginative horizons of neoliberalism had been formulated during the market triumphalism of the boom years—developed and rehearsed by Fisher on his cult blog, k-punk—but the book appeared in a dramatically different context, as the world reeled from financial crisis. It was a propitious moment. As Fisher emphasized in his diagnosis, the effect of the crisis had been Janus-faced, at once calling the system into question and yet, by governmental response, seemingly only to confirm it as without alternative. Developments in Britain would compound this: the following year the Conservatives were returned to power, with austerity measures soon provoking a fresh wave of dissent. Fisher, though primarily a cultural theorist, became part of a galvanized milieu in this new conjuncture, emerging in the more turbulent climate as an outlying but influential presence on the British left.

Yet after the resurgence of the parliamentary left that followed, Fisher became muted and soon fell silent. A second book, *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), had followed *Capitalist Realism*; a third, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) appeared shortly before Fisher took his own life in January 2017, aged 48. His death can perhaps appear even more tragic for its timing: personally, because he had at last acquired a relatively secure academic post after a career of piecemeal teaching and precarity, to help support his beloved companion and son; politically, because mental illness had not only inhibited his involvement in a sea-change that he had longed for, but ultimately prevented him from witnessing Corbynism's surge in the snap election of that summer. Following his death, a series of

reminiscences from his friends and comrades provided moving, often illuminating portraits of Fisher as a person and a writer.¹ But to date it seems there has been no sustained attempt to situate his work within the broader context of cultural criticism. The publication of *K-Punk*, an extensive, posthumous collection of Fisher's shorter writing—blogposts, articles, essays and other material—provides an opportunity to survey his achievement.²

As a starting point, it may be helpful to compare Fisher's thinking to that of Stuart Hall, one of the foremost cultural theorists of an earlier generation. Gifted writers of the left, both were profound diagnosticians of British culture in the broadest sense, and of its enabling conditions: Hall analysed the basis for Thatcher's hegemony as 'solution' to British capitalism's malaise; Fisher mapped the landscape to which Thatcherism's consolidation under New Labour gave rise. Both read popular culture—in Hall's term, 'the popular arts'—for what Fisher described as 'traces of other possibilities', other worlds. Hall spoke of applying the procedures of close criticism to popular works, distinguishing those of real quality from the meretricious or ersatz. The distinction of value was crucial to Fisher's writings on contemporary music.³ Both, in their different ways, were outsiders. Born in Jamaica, Hall came from a genteel middle-class family with domestic servants; a Rhodes Scholar, he arrived in a 1950s Britain where lodging houses had 'no blacks' signs in their windows. Fisher's working-class origins in the East Midlands also furnished an outsider vantage-point; but while geographically closer to the metropolis, his background endowed him with a far more visceral, and longstanding, sense of estrangement and marginality. Both combined teaching with interventions in left culture: for Hall, *Universities*

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¹ See in particular Alex Niven, 'Mark Fisher, 1968–2017', *Jacobin*, 19 January 2017; Owen Hatherley, 'Writing of a sort that wasn't supposed to exist anymore', *Ceasefire*, 17 January 2017; Jeremy Gilbert, 'My Friend Mark', posted 11 March 2017 on the blog, jeremygilbertwriting.com.

² Mark Fisher, *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* (2004–2016), ed. Darren Ambrose, London 2018, henceforth, KP.

³ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, London 2014, p. 29; Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts*, London 1964, pp. 22, 37–44.

and *Left Review*, NLR, *Marxism Today* and *Soundings*; for Fisher, the blogosphere and Zero Books, followed by its avatar, Repeater, the indie publishers he established with Tariq Goddard and other friends; more tangentially, *Mute*, *Wire*, *Compass*.

The major contrasts between them speak to the trajectory of the culture that was their common subject. Hall, born in 1932, came of age in a period of optimism and widening possibilities for the left. The British economy was at the summit of its post-war growth, the welfare state still new and shiny, the unions at the height of their power. While the enormous international success of British working-class pop music—Beatles, Stones, The Who—provided the cultural buoyancy of the period, of a piece with a budding youth culture, experimental works were being pioneered in drama, TV and film. Universities, polytechnics and art schools were expanding. In the late fifties, Hall had abandoned his Oxford thesis on Henry James to work for left magazines, teaching English in a London boys' secondary-modern school, the bottom grade of a class-defined system, and later film at Chelsea Technical College.⁴ In 1964, on the basis of *The Popular Arts*—an attempt, co-authored with Paddy Whannel, to bring film and jazz into the school curriculum—Richard Hoggart recruited Hall as a research fellow at the newly launched Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, initially paying him out of his own pocket. When Hoggart left for UNESCO, Hall stepped up as director of the Centre until 1979, when he took up the chair in sociology at the Open University. He benefited from consistent institutional backing, and as a public intellectual of the television age was a frequent participant in the national conversation.

Fisher, born in 1968, developed in a period that he would powerfully characterize as one of retrenchment and dissolution. The crucial determinant of his formation was an adolescence that unfolded across the cusp of epochs, as the world economy turned from long boom to long downturn, throwing the post-war settlement into crisis. The exact parameters of his periodization were subject to change, but the bifurcation tended to be presented starkly: '1979–80', he writes in an essay

⁴ Hall described secondary-modern teaching as a 'sobering experience' that made him 'acutely aware of the conflict between the norms and expectations of formal education and the complexities of the real world which children and young people inhabit.' It would inform the work on teenage subcultures he directed at Birmingham. Hall and Whannel, *The Popular Arts*, p. 13.

about the depressive sounds of the post-punk band Joy Division, was ‘a threshold moment—the time when a whole world (social-democratic, Fordist, industrial) became obsolete, and the contours of a new world (neoliberal, consumerist, informatic) began to show themselves’.⁵ The economy was put through the Thatcherite wringer, with high levels of unemployment and growing insecurity; the trade unions were ground under, austerity and marketization became permanent conditions, and the universities were subject to remorseless pressures. The mass-cultural landscape was increasingly commercialized and monopolistic, dominating a fragmented subcultural scene in which class and culture had become largely disarticulated. By contrast to Hall, Fisher was himself a subcultural figure, in his relation to institutions, in his audience, in his chosen forms and many of the cultural phenomena he discussed. Relegated to precarious employment, his writing was eventually enabled by the internet, and the reputation that he garnered existed largely outside the academy and below the radar of mainstream journalism. His work was also characteristically subcultural in the emotional investment it engendered, inspiring a following more akin to the post-punk and electronica that composed the home territory of his criticism.

Operating at different points of the neoliberal restoration, this was, for both figures, the political reality that consumed their energies. In their distinct considerations of neoliberalism’s emergence, modalities, effects and endurance, culture was in both cases granted primacy as an analytic tool as well as in the substance of their conjectures. More prominently, the opposition they mustered was in both cases framed as an explicitly modernizing one—their attention trained on the need to adapt to changing times, their critique levelled at what they identified as the left’s failure to apprehend the character of the age and develop an appropriate response to it. Critics of the Labour Party from its left flank, both would try to influence its direction during spells out of office, Hall during the Conservative rule of the eighties and early nineties, Fisher in the subsequent period that began in 2010 and which continues at the time of writing. It was during this parallel engagement with parliamentary politics and the practicalities of political change, in fact, that Fisher most overtly engaged with Hall’s work, not only paying tribute to him, but also hailing the enduring relevance of his diagnoses and prescriptions. Having begun his intellectual life as an antagonist of cultural studies, and thereafter following a trajectory at some distance

⁵ Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, p. 50.

from Hall's, in the last years of his life Fisher came to find common cause with his predecessor.

Boy from the Midlands

Fisher's precise origins were in Leicestershire. Born in Leicester, he grew up in Loughborough, a small semi-industrial town. Son of a small-c conservative family, his father an engineer for a local firm, his mother a cleaner, Fisher attended the local comprehensive school, later recalling an education of 'middle-brow dreariness'. Of his formative political experiences, Fisher alluded to the 'bitter sense of total existential defeat' he felt at Labour's electoral rout in 1983 and confessed that he could not recall the day when the miners' strike was broken two years later 'without weeping'.⁶ Yet culture initially escaped Thatcher's onslaught. Britain's music magazines were flourishing during Fisher's teenage years. At the *New Musical Express*, Ian Penman and Paul Morley were self-taught intellectuals whose passionate, serious-minded writings on music culture—an early, but enduring model for Fisher—developed a reputation for a hectic, promiscuous use of continental theory and philosophy. 'No sob stories, but for someone from my background it's difficult to see where else that interest would have come from', Fisher later reflected.⁷

This exciting music writing coincided with a final flowering of British TV, as BBC2 and Channel 4, established with a remit for alternative broadcasting, competed for the high ground. Fisher recalled being exposed to European art-house cinema by their late-night schedules. The power of first encounters is often alluded to in his writing—'Is it possible to reproduce, later in life, the impact that books, records and films have between the ages of fourteen and seventeen?'⁸ A regular refrain is a lament for the cultural infrastructure that he felt had enabled him—later projects

⁶ Blog, 'Don't Vote, Don't Encourage Them', 4 May 2005, KP, p. 429; 'Test Dept: Where Leftist Idealism and Popular Modernism Collide', *Frieze*, 25 September 2015, KP, p. 416.

⁷ Blog, 'Why K?', 16 April 2005, KP, p. 31.

⁸ Blog, 'Book Meme', 28 June 2005, KP, p. 38. One such recollection was of seeing Hall on television: 'For someone like myself—born in 1968, seduced into Theory by public-service broadcasting, by the Derrida- and Baudrillard-citing autodidacts of the music press, by post-punk, with its many allusions to art, literature, experimental film—there didn't seem anything special to Hall being a face and voice of the BBC'—yet 'the forces that would erase the culture which enabled him to occupy a position in mainstream media were already on the march': Fisher, *The Stuart Hall Project*, BFI 2014, pp. 1–2.

would be subcultural attempts to replicate it—and for a cultural retreat that he saw as coterminous with a social and political one.

The University of Hull, where he studied literature and philosophy between 1986 and 1989, was no bastion of elite education, but Fisher—though pursuing interests with like-minded friends, running a club night and late-night radio programme, writing for the university arts magazine—nevertheless experienced the kind of social displacement famously analysed in Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. Many years later his blog described the 'angst and alienation' that this provoked: it was, he noted, in his case a double form of displacement, one compounded by social and economic change: 'Even if I had stayed in my home town, I could not have remained in the "rooted working-class world", because it no longer exists.'⁹ The opening of an essay evoking this period, from 2014, described the gradual attenuation of his East Midlands accent once he left home, an achievement 'loaded with ambivalence and shame'.¹⁰ A persistent feeling of deracination shaped his relationship to institutions.

After Hull, Fisher moved for a while to Manchester, drifting between temporary jobs, playing in bands, studying for a teaching diploma. The next stage of his life was catalysed here in 1992, when he attended a lecture by Sadie Plant (the subject, Plant recalls, was Kathy Acker). Plant, just twenty-eight, was teaching at Birmingham's restructured cultural studies department. Fisher began studying for a master's there, under Plant's supervision. The glory days of Hall's tenure at Birmingham had ended long before; by the 1990s, the centre's intellectual vitality had dissipated, its transformation into a department burdening it with administrative responsibilities. The wider discipline it had pioneered had largely lost its critical edge—and, in some instances, lapsed into mere celebration of market diversity.¹¹ Neither Plant's first book—a critical intellectual history of the postmodernists' entanglement with the revolutionary Situationist concepts they abhorred—nor her iconoclastic

⁹ Blog, 'Can't Stay Long', 10 February 2008 (not included in KP).

¹⁰ 'Review: Sleaford Mods' *Divide and Exit* and *Chubbed Up: The Singles Collection*', *Wire*, April 2014, KP, p. 411.

¹¹ Hall himself warned against this trend in the 1990s, reminding his successors that popular culture was also 'the scene, *par excellence*, of commodification': Stuart Hall, 'What Is this "Black" in Black Popular Culture?', in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, London 1996, p. 469.

new work on cybernetics and radical futurity had much in common with what cultural studies had become.¹² When Plant was recruited by Warwick as a senior research fellow in 1995, Fisher, along with a number of other postgraduate students, moved with her—fled in disgust, as Fisher would later put it. In their new milieu, ‘cultstuds’ was disparaged as part of a torpid intellectual establishment.

Among the accelerationists

At Warwick, Plant set up a Cybernetic Culture Research Unit with a contingent grouped around a young lecturer in the philosophy department, her friend and collaborator Nick Land. ‘Our Nietzsche’, in Fisher’s retrospective description, Land was the author of *The Thirst for Annihilation: George Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (1992). By contrast with Plant, he had no history of allegiance to the left. Fisher would on various occasions write of his ‘dislocating encounter’ with Land, the thrill of his writing and ideas in contrast to so much staid academic work, the inspiration provided by his interweaving of film and fiction with theory and philosophy. An essay from 2012 returned to the ‘extraordinary anti-Marxist texts’ that Land produced in these years, ‘theory-fictional provocations’ which, Fisher argued, continued to provide a productive antagonism.¹³ Drawing on Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* and Deleuze and Guattari’s *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, as much as jungle music and cyberpunk fiction, the frenetic writings of the CCRU entailed an accelerationist embrace of the dynamic, radical energies of capitalism; Fisher later spoke of their ‘exuberant anti-politics’.¹⁴ The formation at Warwick coalesced in opposition not just to the accommodations of cultural studies, and fashionable contortions of academic postmodernism, but also to the paradigms and pieties of a disorientated left.¹⁵

¹² Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*, London 1992; her cyborg-feminist *Zeros and Ones* would appear in 1997.

¹³ Fisher, ‘Nick Land: Mind Games’, *Dazed and Confused*, May 2011; Fisher, ‘Post-Capitalist Desire’, in Federico Campagna and Emanuele Campiglio, eds, *What We Are Fighting For: A Radical Collective Manifesto*, London 2012, p. 132.

¹⁴ ‘They Can Be Different in the Future Too: Interviewed by Rowan Wilson for *Ready Steady Book* (2010)’, KP, p. 629.

¹⁵ ‘Alienation used to diagnose the condition of a population becoming foreign to itself, offering a prognosis that still promised recovery’, wrote Plant and Land in 1995. ‘All that is over. We are all foreigners now, no longer alienated but alien, merely duped into crumbling allegiance with entropic traditions’: ‘Cyberpositive’, in Robin Mackay and Armen Avanesian, eds, *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, Falmouth 2014, p. 308.

Land took charge of the CCRU in 1997, following Plant's departure to pursue a life of freelance writing, and became the presiding figure of the unit. Under his tutelage its direction became more arcane, incorporating elements from mathematics, science, mystical and occult thinking, all employed in the service of gleeful, sci-fi-inflected celebrations of the market, with capital as the true agent of history: 'Machinic revolution must therefore go in the opposite direction to socialistic regulation; pressing towards ever more uninhibited marketization of the processes that are tearing down the social field'.¹⁶ Beyond the surge of new technology and its attendant cultural forms, the conjuncture of the CCRU was that of the post-Cold War, the irrational exuberance of the tech bubble, the decomposition of the welfare state and labour movement. In such circumstances, rather than a narrative of decline and fall, a heady embrace of the future no doubt held an attraction to Fisher, a salve for the losses of his formative years. His doctoral thesis, 'Flatline Constructs: Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction', an analysis of seminal works of cyberpunk as contributions to anti-humanist philosophy, was exemplary of the CCRU's concerns.

The founding of the unit coincided with Fisher's first forays into print. These provide a further sense of the coterie's futurist cultural politics, which absorbed inspiration from Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer* as well as recent mutations of British electronic music. An article for the *New Statesman* denounced Britpop, a movement whose leaders would soon be grinning next to Tony Blair in Downing Street, as 'indie reactionaries', finding in their work a pessimism about the present absent from the future-oriented electronic-music scene. A piece for *Wired* celebrated this latter work for operating beyond corporate structures through their use of new technology, a shift Fisher described as the evolution of a 'cyberpunk critical mass'.¹⁷ The political bearing of this was most explicit in a longer article for the *New Statesman*, praising the 'aggressive proletarian collage of hyperactive beats, spooky samples and ominous electronics' of the 'darkside' subgenre for finding 'a vocabulary for dark times'. In a classic CCRU *détournement*, Fisher celebrated this tenebrosity for its intimations of the future. To assume that the changes of the 1990s 'must be negative' was 'to buy into the old story that both socialists and conservatives still peddle'—'Our horror

¹⁶ Nick Land, 'Machinic Desire', *Textual Practice*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1993, p. 480.

¹⁷ Fisher, 'Indie reactionaries', *New Statesman*, 7 July 1995; Fisher, 'Beyond the Face', *Wired*, June 1995.

might only be the death throes of the old order. Who knows what the new may bring?’¹⁸

If the CCRU had aspects in common with Hall and Hoggart’s CCCs in its early days—a group of faculty and graduate students, working in an interdisciplinary and collaborative spirit, invigorated by strains of continental theory and new cultural currents, oriented around a sense of rapid change—the Warwick unit’s trajectory was the inverse of the Birmingham centre’s. Disowned by the philosophy department after Plant’s departure, the CCRU effectively cut links with Warwick in 1997 and relocated to Leamington Spa, where it hired rooms above The Body Shop, before disbanding three years later.¹⁹ The institutional culture in which the units operated had been transfigured. The CCCs had emerged in a period of university growth under the ‘welfare-state model of cultural diffusion’, a time of expanding institutions and liberal teaching regimes.²⁰ All this had come to a halt with the Thatcher offensive of the 1980s: universities were subject to dramatic spending cuts; funds were tied to targets and reforms; ‘research assessment exercises’ became compulsory. Market discipline and the instrumentalization of knowledge were now the order of the day. In this inhospitable climate the wilfully esoteric formation of the CCRU, which set itself against what it saw as the deadening strictures of the academy, was doomed to be short-lived. Land took his leave from the academy, eventually finding a perch in Shanghai, where his nihilistic anti-humanism would merge with the farthest reaches of the online hard right.

Curve of the future

Fisher moved in the opposite political direction. What he retained from the CCRU period was, above all, an understanding of capitalism as the inescapable reality of the present, combined with a steadfast commitment to the future. Later, this assumed the form of a will for the left to recapture the mantle of modernity, to disentangle the future from

¹⁸ Fisher, ‘Hello darkness, our new friend’, *New Statesman*, 11 March 1994.

¹⁹ There is a glimpse of Fisher, ‘a cleancut young man who speaks with an evangelical urgency and agitated hand gestures’, in a vivid 1999 portrait of the CCRU by the music journalist Simon Reynolds, commissioned by *Lingua Franca* before it was shut down: ‘Renegade Academia: The Cybernetic Culture Research Unit’, published on Reynolds’s blog Energy Flash, 3 November 2009.

²⁰ See Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, London 2012, pp. 33, 22.

its capture by neoliberalism. 'It's necessary', he argued in an interview from 2010, 'to go all the way through post-Fordism, to keep looking ahead, especially at times when there seems to be nothing ahead of us.'²¹ The distinctive sensibility of his work was forged from the conjunction of this futurism with a sharp sense of loss for the structure of feeling of his youth, for the culture of social democracy whose death throes he had witnessed.

In this, there was an underlying commonality with Hall's activity during the same period: the 'new times' conjectures were similarly intended to sweep away old thinking. In the prescient analyses gathered in *The Hard Road to Renewal*, Hall defined Thatcherism as 'the opening of a new political project on the right—the construction of a new agenda', which demanded a still more far-reaching modernization of the left.²² This was the point, for Hall, of returning to Gramsci's thinking in the wake of the crashed revolutionary wave of 1917–24—not 'to have him do our thinking for us', but because Gramsci prompted the very questions that a renewed left needed to grapple with, 'directing our attention unswervingly to what is specific about this moment'—'how different forces come together, conjuncturally, to create the new terrain on which a different politics must form.'²³ Hall's formation was, of course, historically minded and—despite Althusser—humanist in outlook, whereas Fisher's was the polar opposite: the CCRU was primarily concerned with conjoining anti-humanist philosophy to the emerging cyberculture, with scant interest in historical development. Yet both were deeply engaged with the problem of the new, and as Fisher worked that through—his terrain above all popular culture, especially music, rather than the political field—he became increasingly engaged with questions of historical change.

Finding a medium

After completing his doctorate Fisher moved to London, settling on its southern periphery. It seemed it was by disposition as well as resources

²¹ Interview with Rowan Wilson, KP, pp. 633–4.

²² Thatcherism's project was 'not simply about commanding the apparatuses of the state', Hall wrote—indeed, in its early stages it was organized in opposition to the state, which in the Thatcherite view was deeply corrupted by Keynesianism. The project rather was 'to transform the state in order to restructure society': Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci and Us', *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London and New York 1988, p. 163.

²³ Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci and Us', pp. 162–3.

that Fisher lived and worked on the outskirts of the capital. The cultural significance of the territories beyond the metropolis, of innovations forged in the suburbs and the regions, would be a prominent theme of his criticism. Without romanticizing—rather the opposite—he would note that Siouxsie and the Banshees as well as David Bowie had come from the south London suburb of Bromley; Japan, another staple of his canon, were from nearby Catford; Ballard, the author who figured most frequently on k-punk, and famously proclaimed ‘the periphery is where the future reveals itself’, resided still farther out, in Shepperton.

In 2003, during a period of depression, Fisher established the blog, k-punk. The ‘malign spectre’ of depression had haunted him since his teenage years, and he found life ‘scarcely bearable’ during the latest spell, with the blog providing his ‘only connection to the world’.²⁴ The ‘k’ of k-punk, which served as both title and persona, was a derivation of *κυβερ*, Greek for ‘cyber’, invoked in a capacious sense—not only as genre but a wider social and cultural tendency, facilitated by new technologies. Its penetrating reflections on culture and ideas soon garnered a devoted following. Retaining the CCRU’s oppositional spirit, and its idiom of high theory spliced with popular culture, Fisher relinquished what he later referred to as its ‘uncompromising blizzard of jargon’.²⁵ The evolution of his politics brought other, more incremental changes. Fisher’s thought became increasingly animated by a desire to move from individual to collective, to rekindle solidarity in an age of atomization. The earliest blogposts printed in the new collection display a residue of the CCRU’s asperity; there is also a longer, less prominent, legacy of tropes, such as in the science-fiction cadences that render the functioning of ideology, class and social change with a poetic licence also native to Land’s work. Fisher’s sense of exhilaration at the speed of the contemporary, meanwhile, steadily subsided in the desert of the New Labour years, to be replaced by a preoccupation with cultural and political stasis.

Through k-punk, Fisher became a central fixture in an online penumbra of precarious young intellectuals. Their network of blogs provided a forum for animated discussion of music, film, theory, philosophy and politics; the form lent itself to extemporizing and often experimental kinds of writing and thinking. For Fisher, this represented an underground re-instantiation of the journalistic infrastructure that had

²⁴ *Ghosts of My Life*, p. 28; Blog, ‘One Year Later . . .’, 17 May 2004, KP, p. 693.

²⁵ Interview with Rowan Wilson, KP, p. 629.

prevailed during his youth; in the description of Simon Reynolds, who provides a foreword to the new collection, it was ‘the music press in exile’.²⁶ Too young to write for the *New Musical Express* or *Melody Maker* during their respective heydays, Fisher was in some sense a figure out of step with his times, coming of age as an intellectual in an inhospitable environment. It is perhaps characteristic that the *New Statesman* regime for which he had written his earliest articles had soon expired; under new editorship, it became the effective house journal for New Labour. Fisher’s fractious dealings with ‘very Old Media’ became an intermittent subject of his blog; but here, free from editorial control, he was able to tackle an eclectic range of subjects of his own choosing, from Burroughs to Spinoza, the London terror attacks to pornography.²⁷ Politically, Fisher could show far more savagery than Hall. Disputing the need to vote for Blair in 2005, he asked: ‘But just what is the threat that Howard’s Tories pose? Will they suspend *habeas corpus*? Can’t, Toneeeeeee’s already done it. Will they shamelessly and shamefully play to the right-wing gallery on immigration? Well, yes, but that’s only what the Joker Hysterical Face is already doing.’²⁸ Musically, his scope extended from new releases back through the lineages of innovation that followed the sixties—from Glam, Punk, Post-Punk, New Romanticism and Goth to the ‘hardcore continuum’ of electronic dance music that began with rave and continued through jungle and two-step. He read voraciously: Baudrillard, Ballard, Jameson, Sartre, Fukuyama, Veblen, Kant. Žižek was a particular interest, drawing on the same conceptual materials as the CCRU but from a left perspective. A *Mute* review from 2004 praised Žižek’s books on the war on terror as ‘immediate interventions into the most pressing geopolitical issues’ and ‘a wonderful advert for what theory can do’.²⁹

During this period Fisher was working intermittently in further education, for the longest stretch in Orpington, another outer-London suburb. Again, there was a stark generational contrast with the experience of earlier left intellectuals who spent formative periods working in adult education, beyond the confines of the university system. For Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams, this meant the extra-mural Workers’ Education Association, historically tied to the labour movement. Fisher was teaching 16–19 year olds in a low-level subdivision of

²⁶ Simon Reynolds, ‘Foreword’, KP, p. 16.

²⁷ Blog, ‘Choose Your Weapons’, 12 August 2007, KP, p. 354.

²⁸ ‘Don’t Vote, Don’t Encourage Them’, KP, p. 429.

²⁹ Fisher, ‘The Big Other & “Unknown Knowns”’, *Mute*, 22 July 2004, reviewing Žižek’s *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* and *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*.

the state system. Demoralized students, slumped at their desks, struggled to read more than a few sentences. An interview he gave during the early days of k-punk recorded his admission that this was ‘difficult and challenging work’, but he did not regard his position as subordinate to a ‘proper’ academic one.³⁰ The experience was radicalizing, one that Fisher would later cite as instrumental in his political reorientation. It coincided with the implementation of neoliberal reforms in the sector: his blog included reflections on a climate of ‘increased casualization, of newly punitive sickness policies, of lecturers being sacked and forced to reapply for their jobs, of the imposition of more and more targets’, and bemoaned the degradation of institutions that had historically offered alternative education to those from backgrounds similar to his own.³¹

A new manifesto

These vicissitudes would feature centrally in the expositions of *Capitalist Realism*. In frequent use on k-punk, the term was defined in the book as ‘the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it.’³² The future, within this outlook, would fail to bring anything new. Arresting terminology was one of the work’s distinguishing features: not only the title itself, but a variety of terms newly minted or repurposed—business ontology, market Stalinism, the privatization of stress. The employment of popular culture, as both evidence and exemplum, was another. The book begins with a bravura exegesis of Alfonso Cuarón’s film, *Children of Men*, based on P. D. James’s dystopian novel: a catastrophic event has resulted in mass sterility, there will be no new generations. Fisher reads this metaphorically, as the displacement of another anxiety: how long can a culture persist, in the absence of the new? For T. S. Eliot—sterility was also a theme of *The Wasteland*—the lack of the new robs us of our past: tradition counts for nothing when it is no longer contested and modified.

Fisher recognized that ‘capitalist realism’ might be subsumed under Fredric Jameson’s conception of postmodernism as the ‘cultural logic’ of late capitalism, which also stressed the failure of the future. But he

³⁰ Blog, ‘Why K?’, KP, p. 32.

³¹ Blog, ‘Spectres of Marker and the Reality of the Third Way’, 18 February 2006, KP, p. 163.

³² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, London 2009, p. 2.

argued that, a generation on, the processes that Jameson had analysed had become so aggravated as to have undergone a change in kind. Fisher singled out three in particular. When Jameson was writing on postmodernism in the mid-80s, political alternatives—the Soviet bloc, organized labour—still nominally existed; the 21st century entailed a far deeper, more pervasive sense of cultural and political sterility. Second, postmodernism as Jameson described it was still engaged in a battle with modernism, assailing it in the name of ‘diversity’ and ‘multiplicity’. By 2008 that victory had long been won—‘capitalist realism no longer stages that kind of confrontation with modernism.’ Third, with no ‘outside’ of capitalism, desires and aspirations were not incorporated but ‘precorporated’ into it, pre-emptively formatted and shaped. Terms like ‘alternative’ and ‘independent’ no longer designated something outside mainstream culture; rather, they were its dominant styles.³³

The concept of ‘capitalist realism’ had been used ironically in the 1980s to designate the visual world of US advertising, as a counterpoint to Soviet art. For Fisher it was ‘more like a pervasive *atmosphere*, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.’ How then to fight it? Fisher had little time for the alter-globo movement—its G7 protests ‘a carnivalesque background noise to capitalist realism’, making high-decibel demands it didn’t expect to be met—while the defensive ‘immobilism’ of French students trying to block liberal reforms failed to offer a way forward. An effective challenge had to start by showing that capitalism’s ostensible ‘realism’ was nothing of the sort. Here Fisher drew on theories of ideology developed by Žižek and Alenka Zupančič. ‘The “reality principle” constitutes the highest form of ideology’, Zupančič had written, ‘the ideology that presents itself as empirical fact’—precisely the ‘common sense’ that we tend to perceive as non-ideological. An ideology becomes dominant by naturalizing itself, Fisher glossed, so that its outlook is taken not as an expression of particular interests and values, but as established fact. Capitalist realism had sought to eliminate the very category of ethical value and to install instead a ‘business ontology’, in which it is obvious that everything, including education and healthcare, should be run like a firm. The goal of radical politics was to reveal the contingencies concealed by the appearance of ‘business’ as a natural order. One strategy—Fisher drew

³³ *Capitalist Realism*, pp. 7–9.

on Žižek's reading of Lacan—was to invoke the 'Reals' that underlie the 'reality' which capitalism presents (the Real being, for Lacan, what any 'reality' must suppress).³⁴

Fisher defined three underlying Reals. First, the environmental catastrophe, which capitalist realism to some extent incorporated into its marketing, but whose real implications were too traumatic for the system to acknowledge. Second, widespread mental distress, worsening under the neoliberal regime, which capitalist realism dealt with by privatization—making mental health an individual problem, a failure to live up to the capitalist-realist imperative of 'looking and feeling good'. Third, the proliferation of bureaucracy, which neoliberalism had promised to abolish. His book focused especially on the last two, since the environmental crisis was already becoming politicized, while mental health and bureaucracy were not. Both featured heavily in an area of culture of which Fisher had some experience: education.

Capitalist Realism paints an unforgettable picture of the Orpington student body, analysing its seeming apathy as 'reflexive impotence'—the students' feeling that they couldn't do anything about their situation becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Fisher diagnosed a form of 'depressive hedonia'—not an inability to experience pleasure, as normally associated with depression, but an inability to do anything except pursue it. There was a sense that 'something was missing', yet no understanding that this could only be accessed beyond the pleasure principle. Instead, the students tended to fall into 'hedonic lassitude'. Fisher hazarded that widespread problems with dyslexia might in fact be symptoms of post-lexia: teenagers could process capital's image-dense data without needing to read; slogan recognition was sufficient to navigate the onscreen plane. Teachers were charged with mediating between the demands of disciplinary regimes (timekeeping, exams) and the post-literate subjectivity of late-capitalist consumers, at a time when families were buckling under the pressures of a post-Fordist economy that required both parents to work long hours.³⁵

³⁴ *Capitalist Realism*, pp. 16, 14, 17–18.

³⁵ *Capitalist Realism*, pp. 21–2, 25–6. Fisher elucidated the distinction between Fordism—mythically defined by Henry Ford's decision to pay his workers enough for them to be able to afford his cars—and post-Fordism by a comparison of the gangster films of Scorsese and Coppola with Michael Mann's *Heat*.

The values on which family life depends—obligation, trust, commitment—were obsolete under the post-Fordist regime, Fisher contended. Capitalism required the family—as place of respite, salve for psychic wounds, site of labour power’s daily renewal—even as it undermined it: overburdening the couple as exclusive source of affective consolation, denying parents time with their children. At the same time, under post-Fordism, class antagonisms were internalized, manifesting themselves as mental distress. Fisher cited Oliver James’s evidence in *The Selfish Capitalist* of the spread of psychological disorders in the English-speaking world, like an invisible plague, since the 1980s. What parallels were there between rising levels of mental illness and the new patterns of assessing workers’ performance—the relentless bureaucratic pressure to draw up aims and objectives, tabulate outcomes and formulate mission statements, central to what Deleuze called control societies? Borrowing again from Žižek’s elaboration of Lacan, Fisher suggested that the implicit audience for this data was capitalist realism’s ‘big Other’—that is, the imagined consumers of PR and propaganda, not actually existing individuals (who, as in the Soviet Union, knew what was really going on), but a collective fiction proposed by the social field. Confronted by the permanent need to comply with bureaucratic and surveillance requirements—review processes, annual reports, research assessment—teachers under capitalist realism mirrored back to students a reflexive impotence of their own.

Capitalist realism had not been undermined by the crisis of 2008, Fisher concluded—the bank bailouts were a massive assertion of ‘There Is No Alternative’. But neoliberalism had been discredited; it no longer had a confident forward momentum. The crisis had led to a loosening of mental paralysis: the political landscape was littered with ‘ideological rubble’, clearing space for a new anti-capitalism, ‘a renewal that is not a return’. The task was to build on desires that neoliberalism had generated, but failed to satisfy—for example, the longing for a reduction of bureaucracy. Fisher’s central demand was for a strike against the types of auditing central to post-Fordist work. Teachers and lecturers should strike by withdrawing their labour from the machineries of self-surveillance, the reproduction of managerialism. Mental health problems should be converted into effective antagonisms, discontent channelled outwards towards capital, its real cause. A new regime of rationing could address the double ills of environmental crisis and consumerist culture. The book concluded on a note of resolute optimism,

with the suggestion that the omnipresence of capitalist realism meant that even glimmers of dissent could have great effect: ‘The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again.’³⁶

Beginnings of a movement?

The singularity of *Capitalist Realism* lay not only in the broad features of its analysis, powerful though these are, but in the polemical force with which it confronted the affective repercussions of neoliberalism. Its potency was most immediately felt by those who came of age under the neoliberal dispensation, a generation for whom, as Fisher noted, ‘capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable.’³⁷ For one young writer, a future collaborator at Zero Books, it was ‘a spiritual call to arms’—‘diagnosing the neoliberal problem and reimagining the socialist solution with the force of a revelation’, bypassing years of ‘postmodern hedging’ to offer a foundation for action and a reason to hope; after such a long time underwater, ‘it felt like coming up for air.’³⁸ While *Capitalist Realism* drew upon and developed themes from Jameson and Žižek, it carried a raw emotional charge absent from their writings, a sense that that the maladies of the contemporary were deeply felt—whether in the experience of his students, or of people on incapacity benefit who had given way under the ‘terrifyingly unstable conditions of post-Fordism.’ Žižek himself endorsed the book as ‘simply the best diagnosis of our predicament that we have’.³⁹

Barely a year after its publication, student protests erupted across the UK against the tuition fee hikes imposed by the incoming Lib–Con coalition. Exhilarated by the sudden efflorescence, Fisher described occupations ‘sprouting everywhere, like unexpected wildflowers’.⁴⁰ ‘The only thing I can compare the current situation with’, he wrote on k-punk after having joined the protests, ‘is emerging from a state of deep depression.’ This was the first in a series of destabilizing events in British politics—

³⁶ *Capitalist Realism*, p. 81.

³⁷ *Capitalist Realism*, p. 8.

³⁸ Niven, ‘Mark Fisher, 1968–2017’.

³⁹ *Capitalist Realism*, p. 37. Žižek’s endorsement adorns the back cover.

⁴⁰ Blog, ‘Winter of Discontent 2.0: Notes on a Month of Militancy’, 13 December 2010, KP, p. 476.

disorder in the streets, scandal in the upper echelons—that Fisher scrutinized in hope of a change in political climate, all the while reflecting on the persistence of neoliberalism (it ‘shambles on as a zombie—but as the aficionados of zombie films are well aware, it is sometimes harder to kill a zombie than a living person’).⁴¹ Contributing to the renewal of oppositional activity, Fisher wrote and spoke at meetings and events prolifically during this period, producing a wide range of politically engaged blogposts and articles—on the fortunes and strategies of the protest movements; on austerity, welfare and Conservative rule; on communicative capitalism and technology; on neoliberalism and democracy.

The unexpected success of *Capitalist Realism* made it the flagship title of Goddard’s new publishing house, Zero, and the trailblazer for a succession of books that launched other left intellectuals from the blogosphere: Richard Seymour’s *The Meaning of David Cameron*, Nina Power’s *One-Dimensional Woman*, Owen Hatherley’s *Militant Modernism*. Intimately involved in the project, Fisher’s imprimatur was unmistakable in the publisher’s manifesto, anathematizing the ‘cretinous anti-intellectualism’ and ‘banal conformity’ of contemporary culture, and affirming its commitment to work that was ‘intellectual without being academic, popular without being populist’. The aim was to establish ‘a para-space, between theory and popular culture, between cyberspace and the university.’⁴²

Fisher was once again part of a lively intellectual constellation, this time a more expressly political one, an equivalent perhaps to the left subculture which arose in Brooklyn during the same era, equally stimulated by the protests in the wake of the financial crisis. In both cases, a new generation of intellectuals arose with the sense that space was not available in existing journalism, publishing and academia, and were prompted to develop their own institutions. Amongst other distinctions, London’s iteration was notably more impoverished, reflecting the impact of thirty years of marketization and austerity upon the universities and the cultural scene; of necessity, it was less oriented around higher journalism—the preferred modes were blogging, pamphlet-style books, latterly podcast and video.

⁴¹ ‘How to Kill a Zombie: Strategizing the End of Neoliberalism’, *openDemocracy*, 18 July 2013, KP, p. 539.

⁴² ‘Zero Books Statement’, 2009, KP, p. 103; Interview with Rowan Wilson, KP, p. 630.

Transitions

In 2010, discussing his trajectory since the days of the CCRU, Fisher noted that ‘working in the public sector in Blairite Britain made me see that neoliberal capitalism didn’t fit with the accelerationist model’—on the contrary, pseudo-marketization was generating bureaucracy. His experiences as a teacher and union activist, combined with the belated encounter with Žižek, ‘pushed me towards a different political position.’⁴³ The following year—now married, with a baby boy—he argued that the Occupy movements would have to transform themselves into ‘robust organizations’ with ‘a positive agenda’ if they were to have any lasting impact.⁴⁴ Fisher himself joined the Labour Party, in opposition under Edward Miliband, though insisting at the same time on the need to constitute a force outside Parliament, strong enough to become a dominant influence upon it. A diagnostician of political impasse, he was determined that the left should be on the front foot, replacing reaction with proposition. In 2011 he drafted a paper with his friend and ally Jeremy Gilbert for Compass, a left-Labour think tank, calling for the party—with its post-New Labour direction inchoate—to reclaim the modern with a programme of democratic renewal. It was published three years later, in pamphlet form.⁴⁵

The central theses of *Reclaim Modernity* read like notes for *Capitalist Realism*, Volume Two. Critical of Blairism’s ‘disastrous strategy’ of intensifying the neoliberal project begun under Callaghan and Thatcher, the authors focused on the proliferation of bureaucracy it had brought and its failure to generate cultural innovation. Unlike classical liberalism, they argued, neoliberalism takes upon itself the task of enforcing competitive relations in every sphere, producing an oppressive sense of compulsion and intrusion, not least in fields of activity like health and education where work practices are instinctively collaborative. The left would ‘miss a historic opportunity’ if it allowed ‘the resulting anti-bureaucratic sentiment to be captured and exploited by right-wing populists.’ Labour should ‘take a decisive line, both practically and polemically, against this unpopular and unproductive feature of contemporary capitalist culture.’⁴⁶

⁴³ Interview with Rowan Wilson, KP, pp. 629–30.

⁴⁴ ‘Capitalism Realism: Interviewed by Richard Capes (2011)’, KP, p. 653.

⁴⁵ Mark Fisher and Jeremy Gilbert, *Reclaim Modernity: Beyond Markets, Beyond Machines*, London 2014; see also interview with Richard Capes, KP, pp. 658, 656.

⁴⁶ Fisher and Gilbert, *Reclaim Modernity*, pp. 12–13, 25.

In place of the neoliberal model, the left should construct institutions that allow cooperative and collaborative relationships to maximize their efficiency and outputs in their own distinctive ways. Drawing on Raymond Williams's *Long Revolution*, Fisher and Gilbert argued that education should include real practice in collective decision-making. Public-sector institutions should be accountable, freed from bureaucratic requirements yet protected from corporate predators.⁴⁷ The fate of music culture in the UK—locked in stasis when it was once a world centre for innovation—showed what happened when capital turned a general matrix of collective creativity into a machine for generating profit, promoting homogenized and conservative cultural forms, parasitic upon new forms generated elsewhere.⁴⁸ The musical breakthroughs produced in earlier decades had relied on indirect support through the universal provisions of the social-democratic state—a model for understanding the conditions of possibility for social creativity across a range of sectors, particularly the 'knowledge economy': 'Who knows what a culture in which the internet coexisted with strong social provision would look like?'⁴⁹

To a striking extent, Fisher's arguments during this later period of political activity had their counterpart in Hall's signature interventions from the previous period of Conservative rule. Fisher argued that the left needed to stop fighting on old terrain, to adapt itself to new social and class compositions, to address the desires and frustrations that drove public support for neoliberalism, to connect with the imperatives of culture, to avoid equation with managerialism and state bureaucracy, and to refuse to cede freedom, pluralism and, above all, modernity, to the right. Both thinkers had something of a blind spot for the international setting and foreign policy. In the attention they paid to discourse and ideology, representation in the media and the creation of common sense, Fisher's political writings had long shared methodological ground with Hall. But this now extended to many of their conclusions. Operating at a different moment and with a contrasting sensibility, Fisher's arguments could not be mistaken for accommodations, as Hall's on occasion had been—his

⁴⁷ Fisher and Gilbert, *Reclaim Modernity*, p. 25.

⁴⁸ Formally and generically, *Reclaim Modernity* argues, few products of the present 'golden age' of US TV have gone beyond the conventions of the thriller, the situation comedy or the action adventure—the world still waits to see what genuinely experimental 21st-century TV might be: p. 20.

⁴⁹ Fisher and Gilbert, *Reclaim Modernity*, p. 16.

detestation for the status quo was too visceral. When benefit cuts were passed in 2013, he didn't hesitate to castigate the atmosphere of 'deathly, affectless decadence' permeating a Labour Party that had 'long ago forgotten why you would want to win an election in the first place'.⁵⁰

The interplay of intellectual disposition and political circumstances rendered Fisher in some respects a singular, unorthodox figure, one who worked in relative isolation from traditions to which he was a natural heir. Emerging in the midst of a period of disarray and disaggregation for the left, taking his initial cues from music journalism and French theory, the range of reference that he developed was in large part a pantheon of personal enthusiasms. In these last years, however, as his attention turned for the first time to the practicalities of renewal, his work became newly alert to antecedents, and in particular to his convergences with Hall. One stimulus for engagement came from two works by the filmmaker John Akomfrah devoted to Hall and his legacy—*The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) and *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013). Fisher spoke at screenings of the latter and provided an accompanying essay in which he expressed his admiration for Hall.

An essay of Fisher's, 'The Privatization of Stress', appeared in the same issue of *Soundings*—the journal that Hall co-founded with Michael Rustin and Doreen Massey—as 'The Neoliberal Revolution', Hall's final political essay.⁵¹ Hall died in February 2014, after a long period of illness; a dialogue between the two does not seem to have occurred. Within Fisher's work however, Hall was becoming a significant interlocutor. While Fisher's writing had long been dominated by a mournful vision of neoliberal hegemony, he became increasingly preoccupied by ways in which the political history that he had lived through might have been different. Here, too, Hall provided encouragement. 'The way to avoid nostalgia', Fisher wrote in an essay published in 2014, 'is to look for the lost possibilities in any era, and Hall's work—from his earliest writings on cool jazz and Colin MacInnes in the late 1950s, through to his New Times essays at the tail-end of the 80s—alerts us to a persistent failure to make connections between left-wing politics and the popular culture.' Socialism, Fisher concurred, had been unable to come to terms with the energies that came out of jazz, the new counterculture and punk,

⁵⁰ Blog, 'The Happiness of Margaret Thatcher', 8 April 2013, KP, p. 532.

⁵¹ Both essays were published in *Soundings*, no. 48, Summer 2011.

instead becoming caught in ‘a backward-looking traditionalism which had no purchase on the libidinal field of post-Fordist capitalism’.⁵²

As well as drafting *Reclaim Modernity*, Fisher had hoped to publish a second book in 2011, bringing together his writings on ‘hauntology’ and lost futures from 2006 on. In the event, exigencies of various kinds meant that *Ghosts of My Life* did not appear until 2014. As he explained in the introduction, Fisher thought that the decade that began in 2003 would be recognized as the worst period for popular culture in the UK since the 1950s. But there were traces of other possibilities, and *Ghosts* was an attempt to engage with some of these. An augmented collection that contained some of the finest pieces about music, television, literature and film he had produced, its disparate parts formed a requiem for a future that had not materialized. Fisher’s multifarious writings were arranged around a sense of—the phrase was one he had alighted on in the work of Franco Berardi—the ‘slow cancellation of the future’ ushered in by neoliberalism.⁵³

In Fisher’s telling, one that bore the autobiographical stamp implied by the book’s title, the accompanying cultural slowdown was evinced above all in popular music. Arguments about its ‘deceleration’ had been a subject of perennial skirmishes in his region of the blogosphere. The electronic music that had once been ‘so furiously inventive’ had fallen prey to the conditions of entropy prevailing elsewhere. He was nevertheless enthused by a number of contemporary musicians—amongst them Burial, The Caretaker and William Basinski—in whose work he sensed a refusal to accept the confines of capitalist realism. Repurposing Derrida’s notion of hauntology from *Spectres of Marx* to describe the spectral presence of yesterday’s tomorrow, he additionally used it in *Ghosts of My Life* to delineate a contemporary genre defined more by impulse than style. In its melancholy textures of crackling loops, echoes and samples, Fisher heard the lost futures of a more hopeful epoch.

Hounded

While *Ghosts of My Life* was still in press, Fisher’s involvement in online politics reached a painful inflection point. As the student and anti-austerity

⁵² Gavin Butt, Kodwo Eshun and Mark Fisher, eds, *Post-Punk Then and Now*, London 2016, pp. 101, 110.

⁵³ *Ghosts of My Life*, p. 6.

movements lost momentum, the energy in some activist quarters had turned inwards. ‘This summer, I seriously considered withdrawing from any involvement in politics’, begins Fisher’s critique of online call-out culture in ‘Exiting the Vampire Castle’. ‘Exhausted through overwork, incapable of productive activity, I found myself drifting through social networks, feeling my depression and exhaustion increase.’ Earlier in the year, he had steered clear of left-wing twitterstorms in which particular figures were ‘called out’ and condemned; what they said might sometimes be objectionable, but nevertheless, ‘the way in which they were personally vilified and hounded left a horrible residue’. ‘The reason I didn’t speak out on any of these incidents, I’m ashamed to say, was fear. The bullies were in another part of the playground. I didn’t want to attract their attention to me.’ The ‘left’ social-media onslaughts against Russell Brand, the wide boy English comedian who challenged *Newsnight* presenter Jeremy Paxman, changed his mind. Fisher’s exasperated riposte analysed the ‘libidinal-discursive formations’ that had led to this ‘demoralizing pass’: ‘They call themselves left-wing, but—as the Brand episode has made clear—they are in many ways a sign that the left, defined as an agent in a class struggle, has all but disappeared.’ The new call-out culture was underwritten by a pernicious iteration of identity politics, such that the sheer mention of class was now automatically treated as if that meant one was trying to downgrade the importance of race and gender. Against ‘identitarianism’, Fisher invoked Hall’s tradition of cultural studies, citing Akomfrah’s work. Part of that tradition’s importance was to have resisted ‘identitarian essentialism’—‘to recognize that there are no identities, only desires, interests and identifications . . . the point was to treat any articulation as provisional and plastic.’⁵⁴

Typically caricatured or misconstrued, the essay received a vicious online response, ironically eliciting the kinds of behaviour that he had sought to analyse. Far beyond any limitations in its argument—it was, after all, written during a period of depression—there was both courage and clairvoyance in his stand against the cruelties of this culture. The online world that had been a source of excitement since the days of the CCRU had long provided a refuge and an arena for his gifts. To watch it devolving into pathology, and then feel obliged to exile himself from it—he subsequently retreated from social media, his blogging became infrequent, dwindling thereafter—must have been very difficult.

⁵⁴ Fisher, ‘Exiting the Vampire Castle’, *The North Star*, 22 November 2013, KP, pp. 737, 740–1, 744.

Collected writings

The themes and preoccupations of Fisher's books appear as leitmotifs in the new collection. Running to some eight hundred pages, it gathers up the bulk of other writings that Fisher produced during the period, charting the territory from k-punk's beginnings to the final writings of late 2016; we are promised a separate volume of the pre-2004 pieces. Of its 140 items, well over half are texts from k-punk itself, with the rest contributions to outlets of various kinds (online and offline journals, magazines of art, music, politics), interviews that Fisher gave throughout the period, and a few singular items including a draft introduction to *Acid Communism*, a work left unwritten at the time of his death. This selection is extensive, though not exhaustive. Absent are a range of pieces of philosophical and political interest, including his *Mute* review from 2010 of Jameson's *Valences of the Dialectic*, as well as some extended pieces of music journalism. These omissions are the regrettable result of unspoken editorial preference, but it should be noted that Fisher's work poses a challenge to any arrangement, with many of its finest insights and *aperçus* scattered through otherwise transient reflections. Inexplicably lacking an index, the collection is ordered by theme to aid navigation, but this has downsides—it is somewhat out of step with Fisher's propensity for reading films, music, autobiography, theory, politics and society in conjunction, while breaking chronology impedes tracing the movement of his thought.

Such an array defies synopsis. It contains cultural appreciation and critique, reflections on ideology and political strategy, scrutiny of the media landscape and evisceration of government policy, meditations on the textures of contemporary experience. The collection likewise houses a variety of forms. The writing from his blog is naturally the more informal—typically responses to ephemera, to what Fisher watched, read or listened to, to discussions within the online milieu in which he moved. Reading through his heterogeneous reflections is to observe ideas in progress, to follow the peregrinations of a unique and generous intelligence. The dominant tone is plangent, but there are again flashes of euphoria. A moving chronicler of the *tristes tropiques* of neoliberal Britain, Fisher was also committed to seeking out cracks of possibility, to dreaming during a drought of new thinking. Fervent in his cultural convictions, he equally retained an openness to finding value in unexpected places, with pieces often recording the excitement of discovery. There is

a related excitement stimulated by his writing, which in its decoding of the contemporary can obtain an almost numinous quality, consecrating the debris of everyday life with meaning and significance.

Cumulatively the selection charts the peaks and troughs of a life in writing—intellectual and political, as well as emotional and financial. The progression of Fisher’s career following *Capitalist Realism* led to a growing number of commissions. The new climate was somewhat more receptive to his writing; while Fisher remained a marginal figure, he began to contribute to a range of cultural and left-leaning publications, including a refurbished *New Statesman*. Not that life as a freelancer was any less precarious: in one interview he describes having to ‘keep working at a furious rate to keep my head above water’, while an aside in a searching piece about elitism and populism laments that ‘the broken, piecemeal time of precarity’ impeded him from working on ‘long-form projects’.⁵⁵ Much of what Fisher produced in their stead was cultural criticism. The wide range presented here exhibits his particular affection for popular and pulp forms and genres. Ballard, Lovecraft, Lynch and Cronenberg were all touchstones. Realism in whatever medium stimulated little interest. With the exception of cinema, he was largely occupied by British culture. Lacerating much present-day television and pop music—critiques of a degraded contemporary culture which could stand in the tradition of *Kulturkritik*—he nevertheless set himself in opposition to *haute* cultural taste, to the ‘central London cognoscenti condescension’ that one article deplores greeting the death of Ballard in 2009.⁵⁶ Decrying native empiricism, with its aversion to ideas, he likewise fostered his own theoretical canon, largely from the ranks of continental philosophy.

Post-punk emerges as the most significant cultural allegiance. Though a celebrant of the culture of the post-war consensus, Fisher was more viscerally drawn to works forged in the tumult of its disintegration. Too young for the first impact of punk, he had instead come of age to a soundtrack of the form-breaking deviations produced in its wake, instilling in him a belief in pop as more than ‘pleasant divertissement’. One blogpost insists that ‘more or less everything I’ve written or participated in has been in some sense an attempt to keep fidelity with the post-punk

⁵⁵ Interview with Rowan Wilson, KP, p. 636; blog, ‘Precarity and Paternalism’, 11 February 2010, KP, p. 203.

⁵⁶ ‘The Assassination of J. G. Ballard’, *Ballardian*, 28 April 2009, KP, p. 73.

event'.⁵⁷ A triptych of pieces about the legendary post-punk band The Fall, written between 2005 and 2006, indicates two senses of this. Lauding their rebuttal of any notion that experimentalism and sophistication were not the preserve of the working class, Fisher also paid tribute to the striking Brechtian effect that their work had upon him. This was of course what Fisher himself represented—he was closer in some respects to the artists he admired than fellow left-wing writers—as well as what his work in large part sought to conjure. As he declared in *Capitalist Realism*, 'emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a "natural order", must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.'⁵⁸

The post-punk genre embodied Fisher's ideal of culture as both popular and devoted to making it new, a combination that he began to call pulp, then popular modernism. It was his belief that such a synthesis had prospered with the cultural, social and geographic diffusion of modernist forms and impulses in the post-war period, in large part facilitated by growing egalitarianism and a robust welfare state—in other words, it categorized the cultural landmarks and infrastructure of his youth. This was counterposed to the contemporary vista: subject to the degradation of public-service broadcasting, the re-stratification of culture upon class lines, and governed by the infernal logic of neoliberal populism—'Treating people as if they were intelligent is, we have been led to believe, "elitist", whereas treating them as if they were stupid is "democratic".'⁵⁹ The decline of Channel 4, which from early heights had 'degenerated into depths so embarrassingly hucksterish and craven that they are beyond parody', was emblematic of the change.⁶⁰ The metier of the music journalists that had first inspired him had been to argue that as much sophistication could be found in the finest pop music as in conventional high culture, something that Fisher does himself in a variety of exemplary pieces housed by the collection. In his eyes, the contemporary spirit was the inverse of this, fostering a cultural levelling down whose implication was that, on the contrary, nothing deserved to be taken seriously.

⁵⁷ Blog, 'The Outside of Everything Now', 1 May 2005, KP, p. 298.

⁵⁸ Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 17.

⁵⁹ Blog, 'Precarity and Paternalism', 11 February 2010, KP, p. 200.

⁶⁰ 'Classless Broadcasting: *Benefits Street*', *New Humanist*, 17 February 2014, KP, p. 238.

In the case of culture and critique, the course of the collection for the most part exhibits elaboration and consolidation. The major development it displays instead is a political one. This is essentially synchronous with the wider history of the British left in the period—running from New Labour and the inauguration of the war on terror, through economic crisis and austerity, to a rekindling of possibility and tentative renaissance. Fisher discarded his stance of principled disengagement ('Don't vote, don't encourage them') when the Conservatives returned to power in 2010 in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, becoming steadily more engaged with day-to-day politics.⁶¹ His hopes dashed by the election of 2015, he was cheered by Corbyn's victory. In his unfinished final blog, he describes Trump and Brexit as 'rooted in a longing for an idealized past, and a denial of the complexities and perplexities of the present.'⁶²

These last few years of Fisher's writing register fluctuations in his hopes—periodic over-estimations seem to be willing change into occurring—and the perilous entanglement of these with his well-being. One blogpost, written shortly before the 2015 election, recounts how he had struggled to write for the past year. His sense was that after the 'initial euphoria of dissent', an 'acid fog of despair' had gradually sunk over the country. Recording a sudden uptick in his mood, he partly ascribed the change to the fortunes of Syriza, Podemos and the Scottish National Party. In lines addressing the wider climate but that appear to speak more of his own depression, he writes of his sense that 'the psychic blockade that prevented us from thinking and acting is lifting'. In a subsequent post, following a second victory for the Conservatives, he remained resolute, counselling his readers against despair. An international sea-change was occurring, he insisted, one that had just 'not yet reached an England sandbagged in misery and mediocrity'.⁶³

The last utopia

Fisher was living outside London by this time, having moved with his wife and young son to the seaside town of Felixstowe on the Suffolk coast. The historical processes that had shaped his life were present in its scenery. The container-port cranes looming over the town, which appeared to

⁶¹ 'Don't Vote, Don't Encourage Them', KP, p. 429.

⁶² Blog, 'Mannequin Challenge', 15 November 2016, KP, p. 618.

⁶³ Blog, 'Pain Now', 7 May 2015, KP, pp. 569, 571; blog, 'Abandon Hope (Summer is Coming)', 11 May 2015, KP, p. 584.

him like the Martian tripods of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, 'tell us a great deal about the shifts of capital and labour in the last forty years'. The reflection appears in *The Weird and The Eerie*, which was published at the end of 2016, a month before Fisher took his own life. Assembled at a time when he was working as a lecturer in the Visual Cultures department at Goldsmiths in southeast London, the book's delineation of the aesthetic modes of its title contains some of his most elegant writing, but at first sight exhibits a diminution of political urgency. Familiar tendencies, though, are discernible. While 'the weird' tends to indicate that 'the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete', 'the eerie' marks a 'release from the confines of what is ordinarily taken for reality'. In his late work, Fisher's dreaming of a world that could be different took more visionary, otherworldly forms, tending towards 'that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience'.⁶⁴ This culminated in his final sustained piece of writing, now the concluding piece in the new collection, the introduction to what would have been his fourth book, *Acid Communism*.

The turn of thought that this marked from *Capitalist Realism* is something like that between the Herbert Marcuse of *One-Dimensional Man* and that of *Eros and Civilization*, on which Fisher draws. His central contention was one that had surfaced in his engagements with Hall, that the sixties and early seventies had seen the left fail to connect with the 'collective euphoria' of the counterculture, leaving its embrace of freedom and pleasure to be colonized by the right.⁶⁵ Acid communism is the 'spectre' of this missed convergence; he describes the appellation as 'a provocation and a promise . . . a joke of sorts, but one with a very serious purpose'. Once dismissive of the hippie movement, Fisher here sketches the emergence of a culture dreaming of an escape from drudgery. In one emotive passage, he wonders if the counter-revolutionary energy of neoliberalism was paradoxically 'a testament to the scale of the threat posed by the spectre of a society which could be free'.⁶⁶ These were ideas that had germinated in discussions with Gilbert and with the autonomist group, Plan C. Hall makes a final appearance, dreaming of a socialism that could engage with the feelings he had sensed in Miles Davis's music.

⁶⁴ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, London 2017, pp. 77, 13, 8.

⁶⁵ 'No Romance Without Finance', *Bamn: An Unofficial Magazine of Plan C*, 9 November 2015, KP, p. 424.

⁶⁶ 'Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)', KP, pp. 758–9.

The course that Fisher sets out here represents a certain diachronic as well as synchronic change of perspective, with his field of vision extending back past the period of post-punk and, for the first time, expanding beyond Britain's shores, to name Pinochet's coup in 1973 as the founding moment of capitalist realism. The reduction of the counterculture to 'iconic' images and 'classic' music operated to neutralize the real possibilities that had exploded then, he argued—above all the conflux of the civil rights movement, class struggles, socialist-feminist organizing and ideas of altered consciousness. Theoretically, while the relationship between culture and politics was subject to fluctuation in his writing—at times culture is determining, setting the imaginative possibilities for action, elsewhere it can be extinguished by political change—here he gives a vision of their convergence. Likewise, having long presented his own experience as testament to the transformative power of works of art, Fisher offers a grand inflation of this, locating the possibility of a new world in songs by The Beatles and The Temptations. Writing during a period of severe difficulty, Fisher is here at his most utopian, emphasizing the continued promise of a 'new humanity, a new seeing, a new thinking, a new loving'.⁶⁷

Such passages, along with others from earlier pieces in the collection, now make for difficult reading. A personal essay published in 2014 describes the ways in which Fisher felt his depression was entangled with his experience of social hierarchy, orienting around the sense of worthlessness that he felt had been bred into him, as well as the pain of finding himself between classes. Both, he writes, left him with the sense of being 'good for nothing'.⁶⁸ The impress of this can also be found in his cultural criticism, in descriptions of 'rage, confusion and embarrassment', of 'the painful drama of becoming something you are not'.⁶⁹ A cogent critic of the ways in which social and political problems are reduced to personal pathology, Fisher attributed the management of his depression to perceiving it in less individualized terms.⁷⁰ There is also a sense in which

⁶⁷ 'Acid Communism', KP, pp. 754, 767.

⁶⁸ 'Good For Nothing', *Occupied Times*, 19 March 2014, KP, p. 747.

⁶⁹ Blog, 'Stand Up, Nigel Barton', 13 June 2004, KP, p. 116; Blog, 'Ripley's Glam', 1 July 2006, KP, p. 84.

⁷⁰ His wife, Zoe Fisher, spoke movingly after the inquest about how the market-bureaucratized NHS failed to care for Fisher: Adam Howlett, 'Renowned writer and K-Punk blogger Mark Fisher', *Ipswich Star*, 18 July 2017.

this provided a way to externalize his own suffering. The contemporary epoch in his diagnosis was essentially depressive—not only the deflated state of capitalist realism, but the state of the left, the public's acceptance of austerity, the state of the nation. England in 2015, he wrote, is 'possibly the most depressed country to ever exist on earth.'⁷¹ The last, previously unpublished, blogpost nevertheless finds him unbowed. The tumultuous political developments of 2016 had demonstrated that the right 'had retreated from its claim on modernity'—providing 'all the more impetus for the left to reclaim it'.⁷²

⁷¹ Blog, 'Democracy is Joy', 13 July 2015, KP, p. 609.

⁷² Blog, 'Mannequin Challenge', KP, p. 623.