

Egress:

**On Mourning, Melancholy
and the Fisher-Function**

xenogoth

[A]t the limit of discursive thought experience tends not only toward the outside, toward death; it also tends toward contact with another, toward community. Indeed, so much that “[t]here cannot be inner experience without a community of those who live it.” Inner experience requires a community of lucky beings drawn together, bound together in their excessive movement, in their fall away from themselves. This, then, is “where” community is located: in the chance movement of insufficiency; in the openness that my being is in exceeding the requirements of homogenization, preservation, and justification—in the movement outside oneself, which falls in love, dies, laughs, cries, mourns, celebrates, suffers.¹

0 Spectres of Mark’s

January 14th 2017

Saturday: one week into the second semester of the academic year at Goldsmiths, University of London. The library is busy. The days are still getting dark early and it has been raining heavily all week. I receive a push notification from the Twitter app on my phone telling me that a recent tweet is proving popular with my followers:

In memory of Mark Fisher (1968-2017), an inspiration and a friend. Our thoughts are with his family.²

¹ Andrew J. Mitchell and Jason Kemp Winfree. “Editor’s Introduction” in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille: Community and Communication*. (New York: SUNY Press, 2009), 6

² @RepeaterBooks. Tweet. 14 January 2017: <https://twitter.com/repeaterbooks/status/820272612303667200>

Sat opposite two friends who were writing essays for Mark Fisher's postgraduate class before an imminent deadline, our thoughts grasp at one another, sent into a panic on such little information.

I soon start receiving messages from others about the tweet. At first, most assume it to be a hoax or a misunderstanding. I put Mark's name into Google followed by the word "dead", not knowing how else to corroborate the rumour. I see that a former keyboardist in the band *Wham!*, also named Mark Fisher, had died the month before—surely they meant *this* Mark...

...But Repeater were Mark's publisher, having just published his book *The Weird and the Eerie*. They wouldn't get this wrong...

...Surely...

We sat in silence, continuing to work in short, shocked bursts of disbelief. Then, we stopped. "What am I doing?" someone said. "What's the point *now*?"

Later that evening, our worst fears were confirmed: on Friday 13th January 2017, Mark Fisher had committed suicide.

In the months following Mark's death, answering this question of "What's the point *now*?" became an intense collective project within and around Goldsmiths, informing a great deal of activity, including—but by no means limited to—the summer term public lecture programme which was organised by students and staff within the Visual Cultures department that Fisher himself had been a beloved part of.

Titled *The Fisher-Function*, the series ran for seven weeks throughout July and August and was built around lesser-known works made by Mark in various different registers—from blog posts and academic papers to mixes and audio essays.³ The series was named after a phrase coined by Robin Mackay in his eulogy to Mark given at a campus memorial service on 12th February 2017. In his eulogy, Mackay asked:

What is the Fisher-Function? How did it make itself real, and how can we continue to realise it? Many of us naturally feel a need to ensure this is a moment when the force [Mark] brought into our world is redoubled rather than depleted. And to do so, to continue his work and our own, we have to try to understand his life, and the consequences of his death, at once

³ I assisted with the organisation of *The Fisher-Function* alongside Lendl Barcelos, Ashiya Eastwood, Kodwo Eshun, Mahan Moalemi and Geelia Ronkina.

For more information on this series, see: <https://fisherfunction.persona.co/>

horrifying and awakening, as a part of the Fisher-Function. And I don't simply mean the intellectual contributions that we can appreciate, extend, take forward into the future; I also mean what we need to learn in terms of looking after ourselves and each other, *right now*.⁴

It is precisely the Fisher-Function that I would like to explore in this essay through the very experience of community that gave the term such resonance in the immediate aftermath of Fisher's death. This essay's opening epigraph speaks to this community explicitly. Fisher's death galvanised us as we found ourselves bound together in our excessive movement, in our fall away from ourselves—and it is in this fall, in the exceeding of our individual experiences, that our community has since been located. However, this "location" is not *locatable*; it is not institutional—it is implicitly outside Goldsmiths; *outside ourselves*. It is a community formed by the molten intensities of a shared experience that cannot be shared.

In the months immediately prior to Fisher's death, during my first semester as a postgraduate student at Goldsmiths, I had already written on this paradoxical problem of "community" whilst reading through the works of Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy. A conversation on "community" had entangled the works of all three over a number of decades at the end of the twentieth century and it remains a lively area of study. Serendipitously (and painfully), this initially academic train of thought took on a new significance after Fisher's death, unfolding into newly potent dimensions as it assisted me through the trauma of the formulation of this new community built on an otherwise isolating experience of grief.

The works of Georges Bataille were initially central here for the ways they repeatedly explored communal relations and their limits—limits that Bataille not only wrote about but pursued and experienced. For Bataille, these limits are inherent to all human existence, defining "being" itself through the unshareable nature of inner experience. He once wrote that this "being" is constituted by a "*principle of insufficiency*", referring to the foundational characteristic of all human communication and conflict whereby the "sufficiency of each being is endlessly contested by every other."⁵ In this way, *to be* is to be entangled in the *questioning* of one's own and an other's being, and it is here that community both finds and fails itself, in its folded alterity.

Following Bataille's positing of this insufficiency, Maurice Blanchot would later ask, writing in response to Jean-Luc Nancy's first essay on Bataille: "What, then, calls me into question most radically?"

Not my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence for another who absents himself by dying. To remain present in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively, to take upon myself another's death as the

⁴ Robin Mackay. "Mark Fisher Memorial." *Urbanomic*: <https://www.urbanomic.com/document/mark-fisher-memorial/>

⁵ Georges Bataille. "The Labyrinth" in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 172

only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community.⁶

To engage with this Openness, this Opening, is to “egress”—a word used by Fisher in his book *The Weird and the Eerie* to describe the latent act of exit central to so many paranormal experiences found within weird fiction. For Fisher, the weird is that which “de-naturalises all worlds, by exploring their instability, their openness to the outside”⁷—here referring to a mode of radical exteriority that will be explored soon elsewhere.

The political implications of egress, the weird and the eerie are not made as explicit as one might expect within the book itself but these concepts, within the wider context of Fisher’s writings, resemble aesthetic tools for the creation of passageways between capitalism and its outside, extending the physical act of egress to include cognitive and speculative exits through ideological limit-experiences. Fisher’s last writings, currently unpublished, speak specifically to the egresses made possible by an “Acid Communism”—a phrase that was also to be the title of Fisher’s last book which will also be explored in more depth later but is highlighted here now for its immediate relevance to “community”.

Blanchot’s previously referenced writings—Nancy’s also—refer specifically to the problem of communism in the late 20th century. For example, Blanchot writes of communism as a possibility that is always caught within its own impossibility. This speaks not only of the spectre of Communism—as it has so often been referred to since its famous conjuration by Marx and Engels—but to “community” itself as a particular problematic of the human condition. Since the *idea* of communism—and community more broadly—continues to haunt Europe (particularly today in the continuously unfolding aftermath of the Brexit vote) it must be considered not only as a political question but an ontological one also.

Blanchot wonders: how can utopian communism ever be possible if human communication and collectivity is grounded by a Bataillean principle of insufficiency? He goes on to sketch a paraontological orientation towards Communism—a project beyond the “totalitarianism(s)” which Jean-Luc Nancy would later summarise as a “community’ that is not given but that gives itself as a goal”⁸—and finds himself coming full circle, back to questions of community and communication that are, to invoke the spirit of Derrida, haunted by their very multiplicities and immanence to the Other; revenant questions that will always return.⁹

⁶ Maurice Blanchot. *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1988), 9

⁷ Mark Fisher. *The Weird and the Eerie*. (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 28-29

⁸ Jean-Luc Nancy. “The Confronted Community”, trans. Jason Kemp Winfree, in: *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille*, 20

⁹ Jacques Derrida. *Spectres of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf. (New York and London: Routledge Classics, 2007), 1-2:

“The specters of Marx. Why this plural? Would there be more than one of them? *Plus d’un* [More than one/No more one]: this can mean a crowd, if not masses, the horde, or society, or else some population of ghosts with or without a people, some community with or without a leader—but also the *less than one* of pure and simple dispersion. Without any possible gathering together.”;

It is worth noting at this point that any subsequent references to and quotations from Fisher's *Acid Communism* found within this essay (and elsewhere on this blog) relate to the draft introduction to the book which has, at present, only had a limited circulation amongst Fisher's friends and colleagues—circulated by Fisher himself as he looked for feedback on his writing. I am very grateful to Kodwo Eshun for sharing the text with those of us involved in *The Fisher-Function* public programme at Goldsmiths, and for his reassurances about my quoting of the text in the original version of this essay.

My initial anxiety about referencing this draft text, I have now realised, comes from my own insufficiency before it. The text itself calls me into question. This is an insufficiency shared by all those who encounter this text that is now caught up in its own impossibility. In this way, it is all the more important that the text circulates. Rather than shying away from the problematic of how we handle and publicise the information and concepts within it, it is necessary that we continue to build on the community that Fisher left behind.

The central questions of the Fisher-Function are worth reiterating here: what are the consequences of Fisher's death on his own thought and writings? What is the role of (his) death in the formulation of a postcapitalist community—as Acid Communism or otherwise? Through a sensitive consideration of the political implications of Fisher's death, we may find the intensified care practices that so often emerge from grieving communities can spread and effect change further afield. We may find hope—and not just hope but confidence: an extension that Fisher himself called for.

No one can claim that Fisher's suicide was an act of protest in and of itself but it gave birth to a communal revolt within Goldsmiths nonetheless—a revolt that disrupted the very community in which it took place. In this way, Fisher's suicide was itself an “egress”: an event that has created an emotional exit from present circumstances and given birth to a communal praxis of care and intensified libidinal desires for political change across various scales.

However, to be clear, it is not my intention here to use Fisher's death as a convenient anecdotal entry point for a purely philosophical project. This essay is as much a part of the *process* of grief and depression, mourning and melancholy, as it is *about* these subjects. Through the event of Fisher's death, it is my belief that the ethical and political stakes of his writings, and the writings of others, can reveal themselves more clearly, and there is no recovering from the force of a reading undertaken under the weight of such extreme circumstances.

In this way, Fisher's death has revealed the necessity of an exploration of community and depression above the relative impotence of academia, towards a space of rupturous affect and action that is so often plagued by the fraughtness of clashing subjectivities; by a pervasive principle of insufficiency.

Ibid., 123:

“... the *revenant* may already mark the promised return of the specter of living being [...] a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back.”

As such, this essay is an inevitably one-sided document of a range of communal discussions and activities—by its very nature, the process of writing it has, at times, provoked anger and suspicion as my own sufficiency has been questioned by those around me. Now, as I am making this essay available online on the one year anniversary of Mark’s death, it should also be noted that a previous version of this essay was submitted as my dissertation for the MA in Contemporary Art Theory at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Writing on such a lived experience was fraught and undertaken with great difficulty and others have disagreed or taken issue with what I have written and how—but a majority have not. Nevertheless, as I have continued to struggle with the question of “What is the point *now*?” following the postgraduate academic experience, I have found that the answer I submitted to the university is (for me personally) insufficient. At the time, and specifically in the aftermath of his death, Mark’s work has been a topic that I have found it impossible not to write about and that has continued to be the case on this blog.

I am hoping this final, public version of this essay (the first chapter of it at least) will allow for some much-needed closure.

In this way, this essay is also as much an *act of egress* as it is an exploration of the term. Despite the accelerated entropy of the community written about here (surely an inevitability under the circumstances), I stand resolutely by the text presented here, written within the midst of this community and revisited on its outside. It is because of the encouragement of others who read the first version that a new, elongated version now exists. I cannot say if—and, in fact, I very much doubt—this essay speaks to the experiences of all those others who were close to the situations described, but it is my hope that the subjectivity that has been written through here will eventually disintegrate and spread further than the halls of Goldsmiths; further than this blog.

It is through this whole-disintegration and part-distribution that community itself can erupt into view, not as an imposing monolith (much like the figure of the “I”) but as an immanence that nonetheless remains difficult to affectively access. What was begun as an unavoidably narcissistic look at myself and my immediate surroundings in the midst of a communal trauma may nevertheless, through writing, unfold outwards and take on a life outside the community within which it was produced so that the resonances acquired by the texts explored here can be continuously sustained, their vibrations travelling through to others. (That means you, reader.) Throughout this difficult process, Fisher’s death may at times become impersonal, but we must remember that Fisher himself believed that “forms of depression are best understood—and best combatted—through frames that are impersonal and political rather than individual and ‘psychological’.”¹⁰ It is precisely this contagious, affective and transductive resonance that remains the beating heart of the Fisher-Function—as it was, indeed, the beating heart of all of Fisher’s writings.

¹⁰ Mark Fisher, “Good For Nothing”, *The Occupied Times*: <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=12841>

The first version of this text, as has previously been mentioned, was written as a postgraduate dissertation for the MA Contemporary Art Theory course in September 2017. As I sit here now, it is—unbelievably—a year to the day since Mark’s death. The MA at Goldsmiths is populated with new students and new staff, but no one has forgotten. The aftermath continues to linger, and so it is from within the (un)grounding, the egress of Fisher’s death, that this essay must still begin.

*The door was always a threshold leading beyond the pleasure principle, and into the weird.*¹¹

1 Into The Weird: Emancipatory Politics



20th January 2017

Many nights after Mark's death were spent at Kodwo Eshun's house. Fisher's closest friend and colleague within Goldsmiths, Eshun's kitchen became a space where many of the bereaved gathered to be together—a space in which the disparate community of Fisher's friends and family, students and colleagues, could fall apart together.

A week after Fisher's death, on 20th January 2017, I sat alone at Eshun's kitchen table preparing for a wake to be held there the following day, listening to the coverage on BBC Radio 4 of President Donald Trump's inauguration. Trump's speech was all the more offensive in that moment. Predictably divisive whilst, at the same time, calling for peace and unity, Trump paid lip service to many of the global challenges that the Left feared he would inevitably exacerbate. Both events—one unfolding live across the Atlantic, the other all too close and still reverberating from the week before—were obscene in their juxtaposition.

¹¹ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 31

My most vivid memory of that day, that week, is a white bowl seen through a doorway, broken and swept into a jagged pile on the floor at the foot of the stairs—a broken, mournful object seen through the space of an open doorway, a latent egress.

12th February 2017

Over the next month, I found myself falling into a deep and dark depression of my own. Unfortunately no stranger to proximity to suicide, the shock of Fisher's death nevertheless felt unprecedented. Whilst everyone responded differently, I found Fisher's suicide made the act of suicide itself all too thinkable for me and a six-year period of successful abstinence from self-harm came to an end. Struggling to look after myself and finding my own thoughts inescapable, I felt unable to attend Fisher's campus memorial service.

I decided to leave London for Manchester, taking time away to adjust to a new course of antidepressants whilst, at the same time, attempting to "take a break" from the rupture. Failing to do so and struggling to sleep, I spent successive nights transcribing recordings made by a fellow student of Fisher's *Postcapitalist Desire* lectures.

A new module that Fisher began teaching on the MA Contemporary Art Theory course at Goldsmiths in late 2016, only five of the projected fifteen lectures took place. Listening to the first introductory session, I was struck by a reference to Wendy Brown's concept of "Left melancholia." Fisher referred to the concept, via the writings of J. K. Gibson-Graham, as an

attachment to a past political analysis or identity [that] is stronger than the interest in present possibilities for mobilization, alliance, or transformation. Certainly the Left has experienced monumental losses, and perhaps ultimately a loss of confidence [...] Rather than grieving and letting go, the melancholic subject identifies with lost ideals, experiencing their absence as feelings of desolation and dejection. Whereas mourning frees the subject to move on, melancholia is stuck and isolated, looking backward rather than to the future, looking inward rather than seeking new alliances and connections.¹²

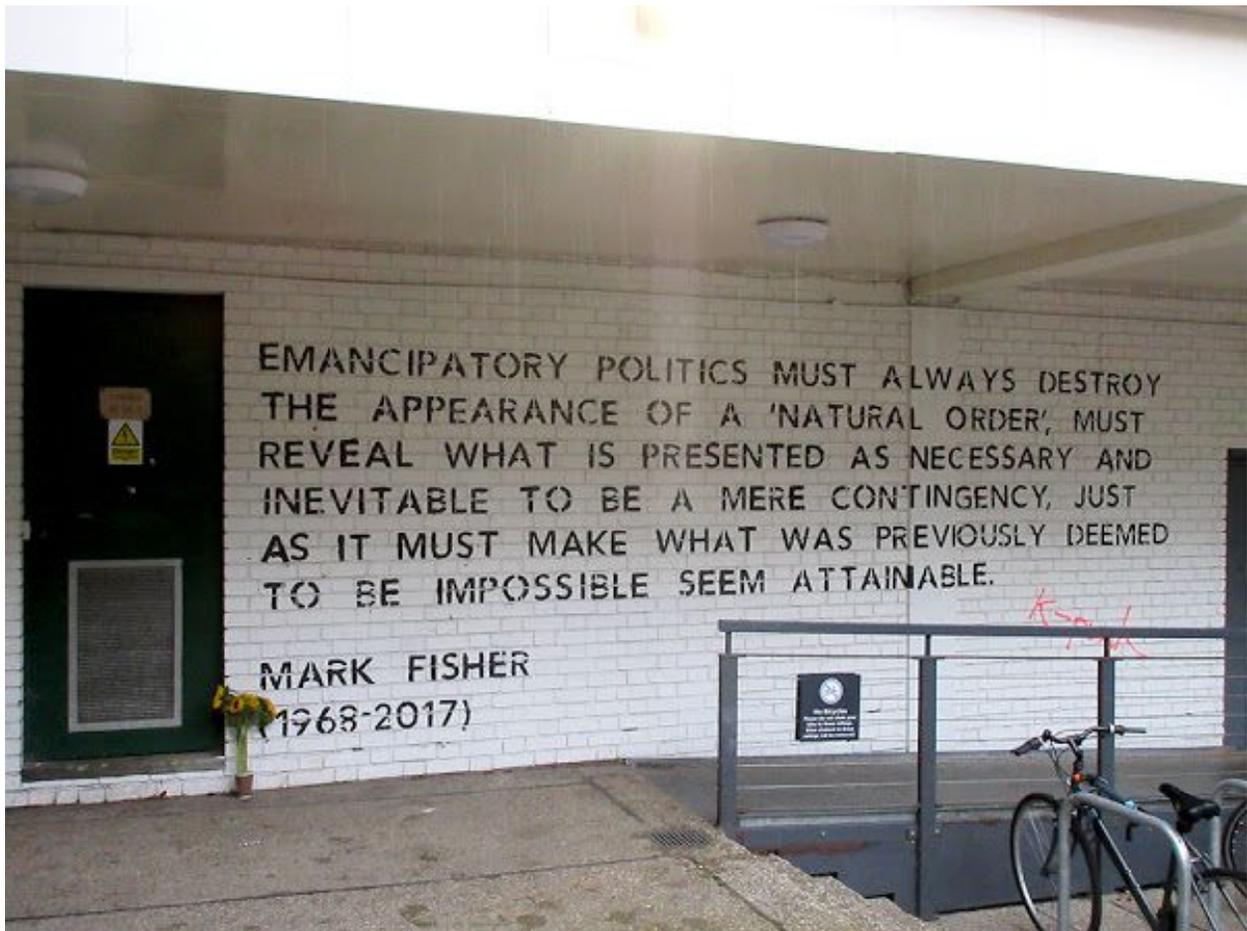
Fisher continued:

I think anyone who's read any account of left-wing politics will recognise these pathologies [that are] related to this problem of the inability to deal with the contingencies and uncertainties of the present...¹³

¹² J.K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 5

¹³ Mark Fisher. "What is postcapitalism?" Lecture, *Postcapitalist Desire*. Goldsmiths, University of London. Monday 7th November 2016.

Transcribing these words, I was transported back to Kodwo's kitchen. The pathologies, contingencies and uncertainties to which Fisher was referring loomed large in our immediate reality. Personal and political grief had become hopelessly entangled. Not only was the Left losing elections around the world but it had also lost in Fisher one of its finest theoreticians and optimists. However, what we were faced with was far more complex than what Gibson-Graham described: a paradox of melancholic mourning, of the personal and the political, each undoing the other. These concepts of grief, desolation and dejection failed to live up to the experiences unfolding around us. Held up to the horror of reality, all modes of thinking fell apart in my hands.



Shortly after his death, a poster made by persons unknown began appearing around Goldsmiths' campus featuring a quotation from Mark's best-selling book *Capitalist Realism*.

[E]mancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a

mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.¹⁴

The quotation was well-chosen and felt like the perfect one for that moment, with its hope for emancipation resonating with both our politics and seemingly inescapable grief. By the time I had returned to London from Manchester, the quotation had become a mural, painted by my friends on a wall by the campus library.

The quotation was also apt for the next phase of Mark's thought: his Acid Communism. At the time of his death, Mark was further developing and transducing his desire for an emancipatory politics that could become an antidote to Left melancholia, offering up a comprehensive vision not only of the Left's past—which, as the collective amnesia of the Left's successes in 20th century has shown, is more necessary than many care to admit—but also of its potential new futures. If the structure of his *Postcapitalist Desire* seminar at Goldsmiths is anything to go by, Mark planned to explore everything from the Allende government in Chile to contemporary issues within the field of cybernetics. He was also, uncharacteristically, looking back to the counterculture of the 1960s and '70s. This is surprising at first glance, not least because Fisher's cultural tastes were more "Love Will Tear Us Apart" than "Love Is All You Need".

In her original description of Left melancholy, Wendy Brown highlights the Left's failure "to apprehend the character of the age and to develop a political critique and a moral-political vision appropriate to this character" as well as its "anachronistic habits of thought and its fears and anxieties about revising those habits."¹⁵ Fisher too had written, in his 2013 book *Ghosts of my Life*, about the "anachronism and inertia" afflicting 21st century culture, hidden behind the thin veil of a "superficial frenzy of 'newness', of perpetual movement" that is integral to late capitalism.¹⁶ Fisher described how the futures we once looked forward to—in our fictions, our music, our politics—have failed to materialise, and in their place we now have a repetitive cycle of retrospection and pastiche.

This melancholic, "hauntological" thought—which Mark is arguably most famous for—later gave way to more positive and explicitly Accelerationist writings. The woefully populist interpretation of Accelerationism that has found its way into the mainstream press as both the hype and controversy surrounding the term has continued to grow, is that it is a process of accelerating capitalism's self-destructive mechanisms so that we can sooner reach its demise.¹⁷ Whilst many more nuanced interpretations of Accelerationism exist that span the entire political spectrum (including those that attempt to sit outside it), Mark defined the concept for himself as follows:

¹⁴ Mark Fisher. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009), 17

¹⁵ Wendy Brown. "Resisting Left Melancholy" in *Boundary 2*. Volume 26, Issue 3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 19-20

¹⁶ Mark Fisher. *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. (London: Zero Books, 2014), 6

¹⁷ See: Andy Beckett, "Accelerationism: how a fringe philosophy predicted the future we live in", *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/accelerationism-how-a-fringe-philosophy-predicted-the-future-we-live-in>

Capitalism is a necessarily failed escape from feudalism, which, instead of destroying encastement, reconstitutes social stratification in the class structure. It is only given this model that Deleuze and Guattari's call to "accelerate the process" makes sense. It does not mean accelerating any or everything in capitalism willy-nilly, in the hope that capitalism will thereby collapse. Rather, it means accelerating the processes of destratification that capitalism cannot but obstruct.¹⁸

Simon O'Sullivan, one of Mark's colleagues within the Visual Cultures department at Goldsmiths, has previously sketched out the Accelerationist dynamics as they appear across the political spectrum more clearly elsewhere, drawing out "subjectivity" as the key point of digression. He writes:

On the face of it what has become known as left accelerationism involves something more immediately recognisable: a communist subject, or a subject that is the product of collective enunciation [...] a 'new' kind of (human) subject, the result of the knitting together of 'disparate proletarian identities', and one capable of 'abductive experimentation' in to how best to act in the world. [...] [T]echnological advances are to be welcomed—accelerated—not only because this is the only realistic grounds on which to address the iniquities of capitalism itself (on its own terrain as it were), but also, precisely, because such an acceleration might offer up platforms for a new and different kind of subject to emerge.

Right accelerationism, on the other hand—at least as incarnated in the writings of Nick Land—would seem to call for an end to this subject altogether (the figure drawn in the sand as Michel Foucault once had it), in favour of a specifically non-human machinic process that continues alongside, and is more or less oblivious to the human.¹⁹

A former student of Nick Land's, Mark returned to Land's writings in order to draw out a humanist Accelerationism that could transform the affects of Left melancholy and its impact on contemporary subjectivities under what Mark had already described as "capitalist realism"—a concept formulated in his book of the same name to describe "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system [...] it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it"; put another way, capitalism's staying power is determined by its own insistence that it is the only *realistic* system of political and economic organisation available to us.²⁰

¹⁸ Mark Fisher. "Postcapitalist Desire" in *What Are We Fighting For: A Radical Collective Manifesto*, eds. Federico Campagna and Emanuele Campiglio. (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 18

¹⁹ Simon O'Sullivan. "The Missing Subject of Accelerationism". *Metamute*. 12 September 2014: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/missing-subject-accelerationism>

²⁰ Mark Fisher. *Capitalist Realism*, 2

This process of transforming subjectivity that O’Sullivan unfolds—called to previously by Fisher in his referencing of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of “destratification”—is central to his Accelerationist project and particularly the potential of libido and affect to instantiate it. In his central Accelerationist essay, *Terminator vs Avatar*, Fisher—via Jean-François Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy*—calls explicitly for the transformation of our impotent melancholy into a productive rage so that we can “[instrumentalise] libido for political purposes”:

Not far beneath Lyotard’s ‘desire-drunk yes’ lies the No of hatred, anger and frustration: no satisfaction, no fun, no future. These are the resources of negativity that I believe the left must make contact with again.²¹

With *Acid Communism*, Mark had planned to tap into the affects of Lyotard’s double-pincerred yes-no through the (re)establishment of psychedelia—or his own conception of it at least: a “digital psychedelia” which Mark believed could help us overcome the “stupefaction [and] paralysis of agency and imagination”²² that is the ultimate aim of “capitalist sorcery.”²³ Writing on the work of artist collective the Otolith Group in 2012, Fisher explored their film *Anathema* specifically as an example of “counter-sorcery, a weapon made from the very same materials that capitalist sorcery itself uses”.²⁴ Mark writes:

De-psychedelization is an aspect of capitalist realism that reduces everything to the imperatives of business and to neurotic psychological interiority. [...] Lucid, delirial and exploratory, digital psychedelia rediscovers the dream time that capitalist realism has eclipsed.²⁵

Digital psychedelia, then, is a conceptual weapon for use against capitalist realism and against the stupefaction occasioned by capitalism’s effective colonisation of unconscious experience through the processes that Sigmund Freud referred to as “dreamwork”—the work done by the unconscious mind to construct a seemingly linear and believable narrative from the fragmentary and implausible nature of our dreams.²⁶ Fisher writes that “any reality constructed must be a tissue of inconsistencies”, extending Freud’s concept to the ironing-out of neoliberal ideologies which currently govern everyday waking life under capitalism. He notes that this process is precisely what leads us to believe that “the confabulations we live are consensual.”²⁷ Blind to

²¹ Mark Fisher. “Terminator vs Avatar” in *#ACCELERATE the accelerationist reader*, eds. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian. (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 340

²² Mark Fisher. “Digital Psychedelia: The Otolith Group’s *Anathema*”. *Death and Life of Fiction: Taipei Biennial 2012 Journal* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2012), 160.

²³ See: Andrew Goffey. “Introduction: On the Witch’s Broomstick” in Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers. *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xii:

“There is something decidedly maleficent about capitalism, with the bourgeoisie as ‘the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells’.”

²⁴ Mark Fisher. “Digital Psychedelia”, 160

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 166

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, “The Dream-Work” in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey. (London: Penguin Books; The Penguin Freud Library, Volume 4, 1991), 381-650

²⁷ Mark Fisher. *Capitalist Realism*, 55-56

this ouroborosic process of coercion, we believe in capitalism's self-confidence despite its failings and inconsistencies, again speaking to the intense stupefaction and paralysis of human agency and imagination. Capitalism is not consensual but its rhizomatic processes of destratification have now spread so far and so deep within the collective psyche that we aren't think to question them—or, worse still, we forget that we even have the agency to do so. (The existence of this agency is, of course, frequently debated by Accelerationists). Fisher continues:

When we are dreaming, we forget, but immediately forget that we have done so; since the gaps and lacunae in our memories are Photoshopped out, they do not trouble or torment us. What dreamwork does is to produce a confabulated consistency which covers over anomalies and contradictions, and it is this which Wendy Brown picked up on when she argued that it was precisely dreamwork which provided the best model for understanding contemporary forms of power.²⁸

For Mark, the best way to counteract capitalist dreamwork and establish this digital psychedelia is through the harnessing of the particular brand of capitalist sorcery that Jodi Dean has called “communicative capitalism”—“that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies”²⁹; “the convergence of communication and capitalism in a formation that incites voice, engagement, and participation only to capture them in the affective networks of mass personalized media.”³⁰ She writes:

These networks materialize a contradiction. On the one hand, social media networks (and communicative capitalism more generally) produce a common, a collective information and communication mesh through which affects and ideas circulate. On the other, these networks presuppose and intensify individualism such that widely shared ideas and concerns are conceived less in terms of a self-conscious collective than they are as viruses, mobs, trends, moments, and swarms. [...] Channeled through cellular networks and fiber optic cables, onto screens and into sites for access, storage, retrieval, and counting, communication today is captured in the capitalist circuits it produces and amplifies.³¹

Fisher takes up this concept in his essay *Touchscreen Capture*, which once again considers the Otolith Group's *Anathema*:

²⁸ Mark Fisher. *Capitalist Realism*, 60

²⁹ Jodi Dean. “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics” in *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*, ed. Megan Boler. (London: The MIT Press, 2010), 104

³⁰ Jodie Dean. “Communicative Capitalism: This Is What Democracy Looks Like” in *Communication and the Economy: History, Value and Agency*, eds. Joshua S. Hanan and Mark Hayward. (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 148

³¹ *Ibid.*

It is not human groups or individuals who have access to an unlimited wealth of information; it is capitalist cyberspace that now has virtually unlimited access to us—to our nervous systems, to our appetites, to our energy, to our attention. We become a channel through which communicative capitalism circulates and proliferates...³²

For Fisher and for Dean, the now-ubiquitous nature of our networked communication technologies is a demonstration of capitalism's ability to capture and shape desire. In the decade since the launch of the first iPhone in 2007, communicative capitalism has seeded a biological basis for itself by infiltrating our hard-wired necessity to communicate with one another and by monopolising the contemporary technological means of doing so. This "biological basis" relates to Herbert Marcuse's argument that, in an affluent society, "capitalism comes into its own" by permeating "all dimensions of private and public existence."³³ Dean's communicative capitalism provides this process of permeation with a much-needed technological update and Fisher drew his line between Dean and Marcuse as he attempted to chart the continuous acceleration of this same process.

Marcuse argues that what is needed to counter these processes of permeation is the establishment of a biological foundation for socialism through the mechanisms of the Great Refusal: "the rationality of negation" inherent to art which is always a "protest against that which is."³⁴ *That which is* is constituted for Marcuse by contemporaneous norms and standards of morality, and so his analysis is tied explicitly to social taboos. He highlights the perceived "obscenity" of sexual liberation during his time of writing and the way this apparent obscenity contrasts with the normalisation of the obscenity of state and institutional violence. Marcuse then goes on to suggest that this structure of social morality, and therefore the human drives themselves, are inherently plastic. He writes:

To the degree to which this foundation is itself historical and the malleability of "human nature" reaches into the depth of man's instinctual structure, changes in morality may "sink down" into the "biological" dimension and modify organic behaviour. [...] In this way, a society constantly re-creates, this side of consciousness and ideology, patterns of behaviour and aspiration as part of the "nature" of its people, and unless

³² Mark Fisher. "Touchscreen Capture" in *Noon: An Annual Journal of Visual Culture and Contemporary Art*. Vol. 6: *Post-Online*. (Gwangju: Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 2016), 16

³³ Herbert Marcuse. *An Essay on Liberation*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 7

³⁴ Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man*. (London: Routledge Classics, 1991), 66:

"Throughout whole periods of civilization, art appears to be entirely integrated into its society. Egyptian, Greek, and Gothic art are familiar examples; Bach and Mozart are usually also cited as testifying to the "positive" side of art. [...] The decisive distinction is not the psychological one between art created in joy and art created in sorrow, between sanity and neurosis, but that between the artistic and the societal reality. The rupture with the latter, the magic or rational transgression, is an essential quality of even the most affirmative art; it is alienated also from the very public to which it is addressed. No matter how close and familiar the temple or cathedral were to the people who lived around them, they remained in terrifying or elevating contrast to the daily life of the slave, the peasant, and the artisan-and perhaps even to that of their masters."

the revolt reaches into this “second” nature, into these ingrown patterns, social change will remain “incomplete”, even self-defeating.³⁵

For Fisher and Dean, late capitalist technologies have usurped morality in this equation but the processes are nonetheless the same—a process Fisher refers to as libidinal engineering, which we are subjected to via the processes related to PR, branding and advertising “which constantly cyberblitzes our brains and nervous systems.”³⁶ What is needed, then, for Marcuse (and for Fisher in his timely update), is a harnessing of the plasticity of our libidinal desires for other means and ends; for other futures. If a biological foundation for communicative capitalism can be engineered in as little as ten years, as the iPhone has masterfully demonstrated, surely we can re-engineer the drives to establish new foundations for socialism and/or communism in another not-so-distant future.

9th June 2017

As weeks turned into months, these emancipatory politics became increasingly visible outside of Goldsmiths, particularly around the time of the 2017 UK General Election. Prior to the election, many predicted an easy win for Prime Minister Theresa May’s Conservative party. However, pollsters were soon upset by a surge in support for the Labour party led by the supposedly “unelectable” Jeremy Corbyn.³⁷ When the results of the election were called in the early hours of 9th June 2017, for the Left at least, the Conservative’s win seemed less important than what Labour’s increase in parliamentary seats showed the party’s naysayers: they did not have to represent a hallowed “centre ground”, as they had done since Tony Blair’s premiership, in order to win elections; they could win popular support with a blatantly socialist manifesto. Through a playful grassroots campaign that included, most notably, unofficial merchandising such as a mash-up of Corbyn’s name with designer sportswear logos, it seemed that socialism was becoming—against all the odds—a quantifiable social desire that was being expressed through capitalism’s own mechanisms.³⁸ It seemed that what Fisher referred to as capitalist realism was being dismantled before our very eyes.

It is here that the importance of the word “egress” within Fisher’s late thought reveals itself. Whereas Marcuse, with his focus on morality, spoke of transgression—of going *against* a hegemonic moral system—Fisher’s egress is an attempt to radically leave the system altogether

³⁵ Herbert Marcuse. *An Essay on Liberation*, 8-9

³⁶ Mark Fisher. “Unpicking the codes of Ghettoville”. *Dazed Digital*. 28 January 2014:

<http://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/18667/1/the-codes-of-ghettoville>

³⁷ See: Thom Quinn. “Jeremy Corbyn has left Labour unelectable.” *CapX*. 13 March 2017:

<https://capx.co/jeremy-corbyn-has-left-labour-unelectable/>

And, for later contrast: Gary Younge. “We were told Corbyn was ‘unelectable’. Then came the surge.” *The Guardian*. 6th June 2017:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/06/jeremy-corbyn-unelectable-political-climate>

³⁸ See: Morwenna Ferrier. “Corbynike! Why Labour’s young fans love this homemade T-shirt”. *The Guardian*. 8 June 2017:

<https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2017/jun/08/corbynike-why-labours-young-fans-love-this-homemade-t-shirt>

through a reclaiming of its functions in explicit relation to the aesthetic practices that constitute the Great Refusal.

This is digital psychedelia, but it is also acid and designer communism.³⁹ Fisher's consistent proliferation of related phrases was an attempt to further cultivate aesthetic weapons for use against capitalist realism, with each phrase sharing an emphasis on the plasticity of our desires. These phrases become weapons for rupturing the domineering illusion of neoliberalism's false consistencies and there are many others like them already in circulation, albeit being put to use for other ends.

The now-common usage of the neologism "redpilled" amongst online communities—borrowed from the 1999 film *The Matrix*—is a particularly resonant instance of digital psychedelia already existing in the pop-cultural sphere.⁴⁰ The phrase first came to prominence amongst so-called "Men's Rights Activists" as a "metaphor for the supposed epiphany of gender inequality against men, or beliefs that contemporary social values and gender role expectations are intended to benefit women more than men." It is now used predominantly to indicate any form of "enlightened" consciousness that has overcome the cultural hegemony of leftist progressivism. By harnessing the mechanisms and dynamics of online virality these groups of MRAs and their political associates have aided a variety of right-wing political projects, from the terrorising of so-called "Social Justice Warriors" as the enforcers of a moralising "political correctness" to the election of Donald Trump as a self-proclaimed enemy of the political establishment. It must be remembered, however, that the "Red Pill" is not an inherently right-wing concept.

In *The Matrix*, the protagonist Neo—a lonely computer hacker increasingly fed up with his 9-to-5 existence—is trying to establish contact with a clandestine community of fellow hackers who promise him the answer to the question: "What is the Matrix?" We soon learn, alongside Neo, that the Matrix is in fact the name given to a computer simulation of the late 20th century, in which Neo's consciousness has so far exclusively "existed"; a simulation created by machines who have enslaved humanity in what is actually 200 years in our future.

The community that Neo seeks consists of humans who have escaped machinic enslavement but who continue to "jack into" the Matrix so that they might undermine the illusion of *that which is* from within, of the world as they—the enslaved—know it, in order to free others and fight the machines that control the Matrix.

In a pivotal scene, the leader of the resistance, the messianic Morpheus, offers Neo his freedom in the form of a choice between two pills. He explains:

³⁹ See: "Digital Bauhaus Summit 2016: Designer Communism". *Egress*. 6 June 2016:

<https://egressac.wordpress.com/2016/06/06/digital-bauhaus-summit-2016-designer-communism/>

"I came up with the phrase 'Designer Communism' a few years ago partly as a way of reclaiming the concept of 'Designer Socialism'—which was a pejorative term, I think, almost exclusively in the '80s—used to condemn those on the Left who were interested in the new kinds of semiotic and technological machineries that were being rolled out in the 1980s."

⁴⁰ "Red Pill". *KnowYourMeme*. 10 May 2017: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/red-pill>

This is your last chance. After this there is no turning back. You take the blue pill: the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill: you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.⁴¹

The Red Pill allows the person who takes it to see the formation of the Matrix for what it is—a digital simulation—and initiates the taker’s egress. Neo, choosing the Red Pill and subsequently undergoing a course of intensive training, is additionally given the power to shape the Matrix at will. In this way, the Red Pill is a medium through which one can manipulate perception and desire, allowing for the direct “upload” of knowledge, objects and abilities through a neural interface—which all humans outside of the Matrix are now “born” (or rather, “grown”) with—and into the “hardware” of the human brain and its central nervous system. It is a psychedelic drug through which the real conditions of existence become not only available but immediately plastic, allowing for the interruption of the biological foundation of the Matrix that the machines have implanted into the collective consciousness of humanity enslaved.

At its heart, then, *The Matrix* is a cinematic fable of political and philosophical choices and its success can be attributed to its ability to dramatise abstract questions usually debated by political philosophy. With its narrative combination of drugs, Prometheanism—which will be discussed in a moment—and machinic enslavement, *The Matrix* could easily be read as an Acid Communist and (Left) Accelerationist parable. However, it is as if the right-wing monopolisation of the Red Pill requires that the left abandon its potentials...

Prometheanism is a philosophical project that speaks explicitly to these abandoned potentials. Ray Brassier has defined Prometheanism, in his essay *Prometheanism and its Critiques*, as “the claim that there is no reason to assume a predetermined limit to what we can achieve or to the ways in which we can transform ourselves and the world.”⁴² The concept is inherently concerned with technology and the digital. Brassier goes on to suggest that whilst “the idea of *remaking* the world according to the ideals of equality and justice is routinely denounced as a dangerous totalitarian fantasy”, our contemporary technologies nevertheless allow for “the technological re-engineering of human nature.”⁴³ He argues that the stakes of Prometheanism lie in its potential unsettling of the “fragile equilibrium” between that which is *God-given* and that which is *man-made*, referring to the fundamental difference between human nature and human creativity. As such: “The Promethean trespass resides in *making the given*.”⁴⁴

Whilst many believe that no matter the nature of our technological advances we can never hope to transcend “birth, suffering, and death as ineliminable constants of the human condition,”

⁴¹ The Wachowskis. *The Matrix*. DVD. Directed by the Wachowskis. Burbank: Warner Bros. 1999.

⁴² Ray Brassier. “Prometheanism and its Critiques” in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, 470

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 469-472

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 478

Bassier cites the ways that advancements in medical technologies have already radically transformed our understandings of these apparent constants.⁴⁵ He asks:

[W]hat exactly is reasonable about accepting birth, suffering, and death as ineluctable facts, which is to say, givens? And by what criterion are we to discriminate between evitable and inevitable suffering? [...] *How much* suffering are we supposed to accept as an eliminable feature of the human condition? And *what kinds* of suffering qualify as inevitable?⁴⁶

Following this discussion of suffering, and with Fisher's desire for postcapitalism so inherently tied to his desire for a repoliticisation of mental health discourses, we can ask: what are the true stakes of applying an Accelerationist and Promethean thinking to a concept like Left melancholia, at a time when public discussions of mental health and public grief are at their most prevalent? When we imagine Accelerationism as an antidote to Left melancholy, how exactly can it transform these affects from within the midst of mental suffering? If what is desired through the proliferation of a digital psychedelia is an altered political consciousness, can the affects of mental health conditions under capitalist realism be harnessed for a process of consciousness-raising similar to that which Fisher sought to establish through digital psychedelia and his more personal writings? Are such attempts healthy or are they doomed to be nothing more than an all too familiar nihilism and anachronistic pessimism?

Fisher was optimistic. Discussing Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes' book *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* in his essay *The End of Emo-Politics*, Mark explores the ways that "therapy filled the gap that appeared when New Labour explicitly repudiated the concept of class struggle."⁴⁷ He rejects Ecclestone and Hayes' suggested alternative responses which he believes endorse

the very emotional remoteness that superficially justifies the therapeutic turn. The problem with what I would like to call here the therapeutic imaginary is not that it posits subjects as vulnerable, haunted by events in their past lives, and lacking in confidence. Most subjects in capitalism—including those in the ruling class—fit that description. The problem with the therapeutic imaginary—and this is a problem that goes back to Freud and the origins of psychoanalysis—is its claim that these issues can be solved by the individual subject working on him- or herself, with only the therapist to assist them. [...] This is why any individual therapy—even that practiced by a sympathetic and politically progressive

⁴⁵ Ray Brassier. "Prometheanism and its Critiques", 478

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 479

⁴⁷ Mark Fisher. "The End of Emo-Politics". *Manchester Spring*. 23 February 2016: <http://www.manchesterspring.org.uk/2016/02/23/the-end-of-emo-politics/>
Link no longer active.

A PDF version of this essay was made accessible to me by Natasha Eves:
<https://kexchange.wordpress.com/2017/03/09/natasha-eves-fresh-new-anxieties/>

therapist—can only ever have limited effects. In order to really come to terms with the damage that has been done to them by and in the wider social field, individuals need to engage in collective practices that will reverse neoliberalism’s privatization of stress.⁴⁸

14th June 2017

Echoing the proximity of Fisher’s death to the US presidential election, one week after the UK General Election, on 14th June 2017, a fire broke out at the Grenfell tower block in the London borough of North Kensington. The fire raged throughout the night and into the following day with images spreading throughout social networks that were traumatically familiar post-9/11. However, this horrific spectacle was not the doing of a Terrorist Other—it was the result of homegrown working-class oppression and government policies of austerity.

According to official estimates at the time, the fire claimed the lives of around 80 people—volunteers and other organisations believe the true number to be much higher. Local communities were flooded with a politicised grief and anger that felt all too familiar. Parliamentary and local government support was lacklustre, compounding already present feelings of neglect. In response to the government’s failure to act as needed, communities around London rallied together to provide aid and relief to those affected. As if the event of the fire itself was not revealing enough of the state’s incompetence and systematic failing of marginalised groups, the community response was so effective that the London Anarchist Federation later declared:

This is anarchism in action. We must look more and more to this kind of grassroots organisation in the future as capitalism seeks to strip away social services in line with its strategy of austerity.⁴⁹

The General Election and the Grenfell fire—both unprecedented in their own ways—fostered new potentials for major political change in the UK. The grief and pessimism, the mourning and melancholy that they provoked was palpable. If the subsequent marching on local council offices was not enough, the tower itself stands as a monument to “social murder”, as Labour’s Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell described it.⁵⁰ Alongside its other high-rise landmarks—the

⁴⁸ Mark Fisher. “The End of Emo-Politics”.

⁴⁹ “The Grenfell Tower Inferno and Anarchism.” *London Anarchist Federation*. 27 June 2017:

<https://aflondon.wordpress.com/2017/06/27/the-grenfell-tower-inferno-and-anarchism/>

⁵⁰ “John McDonnell—Grenfell disaster was ‘social murder’”. *OldQueenTV*. YouTube. 16 July 2017:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zsvzg6_1uUo

McDonnell’s use of the phrase “social murder” is in reference to Friedrich Engels. See: “Condition of the Working Class in England, by Engels, 1845”. *Marxists Internet Archive*:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/ch07.htm>

“When one individual inflicts bodily injury upon another such that death results, we call the deed manslaughter; when the assailant knew in advance that the injury would be fatal, we call his deed murder. But when society places hundreds of proletarians in such a position that they inevitably meet a too early and an unnatural

Gherkin, the Walkie-Talkie, the Cheesegrater—London can now count the Graveyard amongst them. Now that a social housing block—rather than a private economic or educational institution—had become a symbolic and real site of trauma, state violence and neglect, the political discussion shifted.

Robin Mackay, tweeting in the aftermath of both the General Election and the Grenfell fire, rightly wished that Mark was still around to offer his thoughts.⁵¹

Mark would have surely had a lot to say.

The collective and communal response to the crisis that befell Goldsmiths—and similarly the tragedy of Grenfell tower—functions precisely as a form of consciousness-raising to this end. Responses included the explicit highlighting of class struggles and, particularly with Grenfell, the voices of those affected were particularly prevalent online, repeatedly speaking truth to power.⁵² The response to Fisher's death at Goldsmiths, whilst less the subject of intense interest to the national and international press, likewise engaged in practices of consciousness-raising online and in person, inspired by Fisher's own writings.

In *Good For Nothing*, his most personal and vulnerable piece of writing on depression, Mark explains that capitalism itself—and particularly the state-sanctioned project of austerity that hopes to protect it—is largely responsible for the endemic levels of mental distress that we see all around us.⁵³ Capitalist realism engenders a kind of psychic “slow violence”⁵⁴ through its cycles of individualisation and psychologisation that explain away—whilst ignoring their role as causes of—mental illness. Discussing these processes in *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher writes:

The current ruling ontology denies any possibility of a social causation of mental illness. Considering mental illness as an individual

death, one which is quite as much a death by violence as that by the sword or bullet; when it deprives thousands of the necessities of life, places them under conditions in which they cannot live – forces them, through the strong arm of the law, to remain in such conditions until that death ensues which is the inevitable consequence – knows that these thousands of victims must perish, and yet permits these conditions to remain, its deed is murder just as surely as the deed of the single individual; disguised, malicious murder, murder against which none can defend himself, which does not seem what it is, because no man sees the murderer, because the death of the victim seems a natural one, since the offence is more one of omission than of commission. But murder it remains.”

⁵¹ See: *Urbanomic*. Tweet. 8 June 2017: <https://twitter.com/urbanomicdotcom/status/872930280688025600>

⁵² See: “Ishmail speaks reality to a sky news reporter GTR”. *JIMINY CRICKET*. YouTube. 15 June 2017:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcJPlkqOYX0&t=1s>

⁵³ Mark Fisher. “Good for Nothing”. *The Occupied Times*. 19 March 2014: <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=12841>

“We must understand the fatalistic submission of the UK's population to austerity as the consequence of a deliberately cultivated depression. This depression is manifested in the acceptance that things will get worse (for all but a small elite), that we are lucky to have a job at all (so we shouldn't expect wages to keep pace with inflation), that we cannot afford the collective provision of the welfare state. Collective depression is the result of the ruling class project of resubordination.”

⁵⁴ See: Rob Nixon. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011)

chemico-biological problem has enormous benefits for capitalism. First, it reinforces Capital's drive towards atomistic individualization (you are sick because of your brain chemistry). Second, it provides an enormously lucrative market in which multinational pharmaceutical companies can peddle their pharmaceuticals (we can cure you with our SSRIs). It goes without saying that all mental illnesses are neurologically *instantiated*, but this says nothing about their *causation*. If it is true, for instance, that depression is constituted by low serotonin levels, what still needs to be explained is why particular individuals have low levels of serotonin. This requires a social and political explanation; and the task of repoliticizing mental illness is an urgent one if the Left wants to challenge capitalist realism.⁵⁵

Many admirers of Fisher's work—myself included—came to his writings through identifications with these most personal of experiences. This mode of writing was, for many, Mark's most affecting critical register. However, Fisher's writings on depression were not in themselves depressive. Their power lay in their immanence to his emotional state and his talent for making the affects of this state transductive. The question painfully remains: why did this process, in the end, not work for Fisher himself? Or rather, why did it stop working? Whatever the answer, it does not mean that his writings must stop working for us *here, right now*. Such a question is central to the Fisher-Function, making it necessary to contend with the political problematics of mental health discourses honestly and from a place where the personal and political implications of Mark's thought feels most explicit; from a place of lingering grief and abject depression where the rupture both necessitates a renewed intensity of productive thought and makes traumatically thinkable the act of following Fisher through to the void.

It is perhaps a result of the sensitivity of these issues that Brown and Gibson-Graham are conservative in their own analyses of Left melancholia. Whilst Fisher wanted to transform the affects of Left melancholia, that is not to say that he was not prone to the superficiality of positive affirmations. Death featured predominantly in many of his writings. In his PhD thesis, for instance, Mark conceptualised a radical plane of immanence on which everything—animate and inanimate, organic and nonorganic—could be seen as “dead”. He asked: “what if we are as ‘dead’ as the machines?”⁵⁶ This cybernetic plane of immanence—the Gothic flatline—was related to his concept of “Gothic Materialism” which he used to analyse the accelerated proliferation of non-human forces acting upon the capitalist world. The question posed by this radical plane of immanence can be formulated as follows: can we understand death outside of its opposition to life, outside the organic, and alongside the machines that increasingly affect the structure our reality? Undermining the horrific finality of death, Fisher hoped to engender a new thinking for a world in which a lack of biological “life” no longer meant a lack of agency and he chose to do this through the Gothic aesthetics that appealed to him most.

⁵⁵ Mark Fisher. *Capitalist Realism*, 37

⁵⁶ Mark Fisher. “Flatline Constructs: Gothic Materialism and Cybernetic Theory-Fiction” (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1999)

The sense of the Gothic established here would remain a constant presence within Fisher's writings for the next twenty years. For instance, his use of the term "Gothic Materialism" in 1999 must be thought, he writes, as "a deliberate attempt to disassociate the Gothic from everything supernatural, ethereal or otherworldly." However, his 2016 book *The Weird and the Eerie* returns to a more classic conception of the Gothic in order to invoke a more entrenched and historical association with Marcuse's Great Refusal and the emancipatory potentials found within the *other-worldly*.

The questions raised here are similar to those formulated by Marcuse and likewise Brassier: capitalism has demonstrated the plasticity of our drives through its very manipulation of them, including what Freud referred to as the "death drive", and so surely we can re-engineer this too for positive ontopolitical ends. Following on from Freud, Marcuse was one of the first to undertake a prolonged analysis of the effects of industrial capitalism on our drives in his 1956 book *Eros and Civilisation*. Discussing the death drive (also known as the "death instinct")—which will be explored in more detail later—he wrote:

The death instinct is destructiveness not for its own sake, but for the relief of tension. The descent toward death is an unconscious flight from pain and want. It is an expression of the eternal struggle against suffering and repression. And the death instinct itself seems to be affected by the historical changes which affect struggle.⁵⁷

This formulation makes explicit the death drive's plasticity in relation to contemporaneous circumstances and political struggles, particularly the previously discussed relations between mental illness and the process of de-psychedelisation inherent to capitalist realism.

Considering this plasticity alongside the complex nature of Fisher's interests, it is worth holding Brown and Gibson-Graham's conceptions of Left melancholy up to further scrutiny. Enzo Traverso's 2016 book *Left-Wing Melancholia* offers an alternative view of the concept that aligns far better with Fisher's thinking. Traverso returns to Freud who, in his essay *Mourning and Melancholia*, suggests a thin distinction between these two titular states of mind. Freud describes how mourning and melancholia are affective in opposing directions—mourning is seen as a natural emotional response to the loss of an *external* love-object; melancholia as an *inward-facing* pathological response to a loss of self-esteem; a loss of the ego. Apart from this apparent opposition, these two states share many similarities—Freud writes that it is "most remarkable that it never occurs to us to consider mourning as a pathological condition and present it to the doctor for treatment, despite the fact that it produces severe deviations from normal behaviour"—and mourning can also, of course, lead to melancholia—calling to Fisher's formulation of the inside as a folding of the outside.⁵⁸ Traverso explains:

⁵⁷ Herbert Marcuse. *Eros and Civilisation*. (London: Routledge, 1998), 29

⁵⁸ Sigmund Freud. "Mourning and Melancholia" in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. Shaun Whiteside. (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 202

In Freud's terms, we could define "Left melancholy" as the result of an impossible mourning: communism is both a finished experience and an irreplaceable loss, in an age in which the end of utopias obstructs the separation from the lost beloved ideal as well as a libidinal transfer toward a new object of love. This seems to be the interpretation suggested by Wendy Brown, according to whom Left melancholy is a "conservative tendency" impeding subjects from finding a new "critical and visionary spirit." However, one could observe that it is precisely the lack of a new spirit and vision that annihilates any attempt to distance oneself from the lost object and to overcome the loss. This "conservative tendency" could also be viewed as a form of resistance against demission and betrayal. Because of the end of utopias, a successful mourning could also mean identification with the enemy: lost socialism replaced by accepted capitalism. If a socialist alternative does not exist, the rejection of real socialism inevitably becomes a disenchanting acceptance of market capitalism, neoliberalism, and so on. In this case, melancholy would be the obstinate refusal of any compromise with domination. If we abandon the Freudian model and "depathologize" melancholy, we could see it as a necessary premise of a mourning process, a step that precedes and allows mourning instead of paralyzing it and thus helps the subject to become active again. In other words, melancholy could be seen as an enabling process in which, according to Judith Butler's lexicon, the subject experiences "a withdrawal or retraction from speech that makes speech possible" (a vision that Freud himself would have finally accepted in *The Ego and the Id*).⁵⁹

This passage alludes to many of the topics that Mark was well-known for writing about, particularly lost futures and capitalist realist pathologization. Read through Fisher's thought, Traverso's Left melancholia can be understood as a symptom of capitalist realism itself by assigning a pathologized melancholy its sociopolitical foundation. Crucially, Traverso also highlights the productive potential of melancholy and mourning by referencing Judith Butler, who suggests that "melancholy offers potential insight into how the boundaries of the social are instituted and maintained, not only at the expense of psychic life, but through binding psychic life into forms of melancholic ambivalence."⁶⁰ Even Brown notes the distinction between "Left melancholy" and mourning and melancholy as they are experienced by the individual, noting Walter Benjamin's "well-developed appreciation of the productive value of acedia, sadness, and mourning for political and cultural work, and in his study of Charles Baudelaire, Benjamin

⁵⁹ Enzo Traverso. *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History and Memory*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 45

⁶⁰ Judith Butler. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 167-68

treated melancholia itself as something of a creative wellspring.⁶¹ If this creative wellspring is utilised as effectively by a community as it is by the individual, what else can the affects of mourning and melancholy make possible?

The apparent nihilism of this thinking is already embedded within Accelerationist discourses, which were “introduced into political theory to designate a certain nihilistic alignment of philosophical thought with the excesses of capitalist culture (or anticulture).”⁶² This nihilism, however, is far richer than the populist understanding of the term as “the belief that all values are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated.”⁶³ Brassier defines an appropriately inhuman Accelerationist nihilism in his 2007 book *Nihil Unbound* as “the unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality, which, despite the presumption of human narcissism, is indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable.”⁶⁴

This nihilism speaks explicitly to the plot of *The Matrix* and, indeed, the film opens with a fitting reference. In an early scene, Neo sells a mysterious MiniDisc—which we can only assume contains some kind of hacking software or computer virus—to a man who has knocked at his door. Taking the man’s money, Neo retrieves the MiniDisc from a hollowed-out copy of Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, with the title of the last chapter clearly visible—*On Nihilism*.

In the book, Baudrillard argues that today’s nihilism “is one of transparency, and it is in some sense more radical, more crucial than in its prior and historical forms, because this transparency, this irresolution is that of the system, and that of all the theory that still pretends to analyse it.”⁶⁵ Baudrillard argues that we are in a new state of nihilism, following on from the nihilisms inherent to the artistic movements of Romanticism and Surrealism—at first echoing Marcuse’s Great Refusal—but now, he writes, “all that remains, is the fascination for desertlike and indifferent forms, for the very operation of the system that annihilates us”⁶⁶—which speaks more to the inhumanism of Landian Accelerationism than Fisher’s Marcusian interpretations. Baudrillard goes on to ask:

What then remains of a possible nihilism in theory? What new scene can unfold, where nothing and death could be replayed as a *challenge*, as a stake?⁶⁷

⁶¹ Wendy Brown. “Resisting Left Melancholia”, 20.

It is from Walter Benjamin that the phrase “Left melancholia” originates.

⁶² Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian. “Introduction” in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, 4

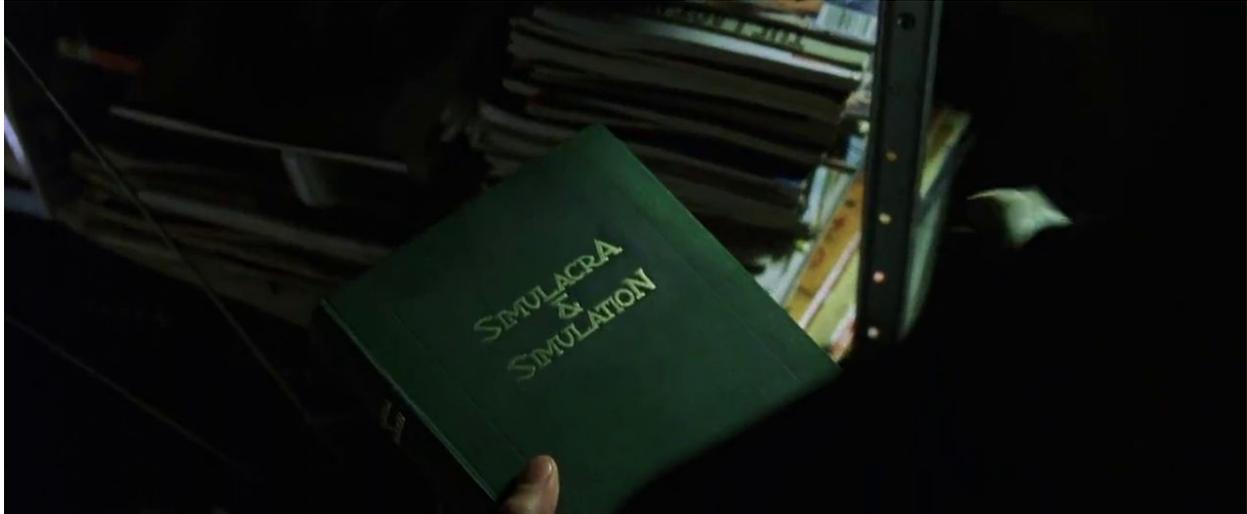
⁶³ Alan Pratt. “Nihilism”. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/nihilism/>

⁶⁴ Ray Brassier. *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), xi

⁶⁵ Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 159

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 159-160

⁶⁷ Jean Baudrillard. *Simulacra and Simulation*, 159



In much the same way that Neo's copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* is hollowed out and filled with new weaponised counter-sorceries, Fisher and Brassier offer us a Promethean nihilism: an affirmative project of philosophical emancipation; a nihilism that "is not an existential quandary but a speculative opportunity."⁶⁸ Fisher, likewise, in his essay *Practical Eliminativism*, describes this speculative nihilism as a transgression (or egression) of experience; as the pushing beyond of those limit-experiences outlined by Bataille and Blanchot in this essay's introduction. The crux of this speculative opportunity is, for Fisher, a "kind of impossible quest to experience not only the maximally intense, but beyond that, the quest to experience from a position where experience itself is not possible; i.e. death, death itself as the limit."⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ray Brassier. *Nihil Unbound*, xi

⁶⁹ Mark Fisher. "Practical Eliminativism: Getting Out of the Face, Again" in *Speculative Aesthetics*, eds. Robin Mackay, Luke Pendrell, James Trafford. (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014; e-Book edition), 102.

To return to Bataille for a moment: his relationship to transgression in particular can be read as being complementary to Marcuse's previous identification of the role of morality in structuring society. Bataille's conception is extended in his book *Eroticism*, in which he argues that it is transgression that constitutes society *as such*.⁷⁰ In his analysis of Bataille's *Eroticism* and the explorations of communal transgression found therein, David Allison describes how, for Bataille, transgression

produces a new world, that of the sacred [...] as opposed to the workaday, the quotidian necessity of laboring, the rule-governed tedium of the human condition. That condition is the one into which one is born, without asking to be, throughout which one is condemned to labor, and in which one is bound to die [...] In the extreme case, transgression "opens the door into what lies beyond the limits usually observed."⁷¹

The sacred, for Bataille, refers to a "radical, subversive negativity"—that Great Refusal at the intersection of literature, philosophy and experience; a folded outside that is immanent to the discourses of religion and spirituality that so fascinated Bataille.⁷² So many of the communal transgressions that sit at the heart of Bataille's fictions become, in light of his philosophy, the acceptance of and desire for sacrifice—a form of transgression, Bataille would highlight elsewhere, that constitutes the founding event of Christianity in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.⁷³ Fisher notes how death functions in new ways for thought in this context. He writes:

[D]eath—not just individual death, but hyper-death, and not just the unexperienceable, but the evaporation of the very possibility of experience, via extinction or whatever—becomes contrasted to experience as such. You can't experience extinction, and so we no longer worry about that. ... Instead, extinction becomes a speculative and cognitive challenge.⁷⁴

In challenging Bataille's belief in the sociopolitical importance of transgression, Fisher presents egression as an alternative tactic—not to rest on the transgression of *this* world's meanings and values, but to exit and establish new ones altogether from the subjective position of "death"—a experiential impossibility, maybe, but a cognitive necessity in present circumstances. In relation to the designing of desire discussed earlier, Fisher goes on to ask, since experience is inherently aesthetic, "how can one have the aesthetic without experience?"⁷⁵ He suggests that

⁷⁰ Georges Bataille. "Transgression" in *Eroticism: Death & Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 63 -70

⁷¹ David. B. Allison. "Transgression and the Community of the Sacred" in *The Obsessions of Georges Bataille*, 95

⁷² Carolyn Bailey Gill. "Introduction" in *Bataille: Writing the Sacred*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill. (London: Routledge, 1995), xv

⁷³ See: Georges Bataille. "Summit and Decline" in *On Nietzsche*, trans. Stuart Kendall. (New York: SUNY Press, 2015)

⁷⁴ Mark Fisher. "Practical Eliminativism", 102.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

the “question now is whether a certain kind of defacialization can be recovered—whether a practical, not merely theoretical, eliminativist project can be resumed, and whether we can start getting out of our faces again.”⁷⁶ This is precisely a question of egressing the limits placed on subjectivity by capitalist realism. We must allow the atomised capitalist subject to die, and form a new collective subject in its place.

Neo’s egress from the Matrix is likewise a process of defacialization in this way—from simulated and oppressed mask to actualised and seemingly limitless self—but the mental risks of the process are made clear by Morpheus. After the Matrix has been revealed to him, Neo goes into shock—he collapses, vomits and passes out. Morpheus later apologises, saying his group do not usually “free” anyone as old as Neo—the longer someone has “lived” in the Matrix, the less able they are to recover from the shock of egress and the demands it places on subjectivity and neuroplasticity. In this way, *The Matrix*’s instantiation of reaching the outside of *that which is* is more Adornian than Marcusean. As Fisher writes in the introduction to *Acid Communism*, in the work of Theodor Adorno,

we are invited to endlessly examine the wounds of a damaged life under capital; the idea of a world beyond capital is despatched into a utopia beyond. Art only marks our distance from this utopia. By contrast, Marcuse vividly evokes, as an immediate prospect, a world totally transformed.⁷⁷

The Weird and the Eerie likewise vividly evokes the more immanent prospect of a world totally transformed, exploring varied aesthetic precedents for “getting out of our faces again.” Strengthening this link to *The Weird and the Eerie* in the introduction to *Acid Communism*, Fisher goes on to discuss the accessibility of and libidinal desirability for “the outside”—the outside of *that which is*; of capitalism; of reality as we know it—both now and within the counterculture of the 1960s and ‘70s. He refers to the “metaphysical hack” of LSD, describing how, through use of this powerful hallucinogenic, “[t]he conditions which made ordinary experience possible could now be encountered, transformed and escaped—at least temporarily.”⁷⁸ However, we still remain somewhat entrenched in capitalist realism, culturally and psychologically, and, because of this, the outside is no longer attractive and desirable; no longer psychedelic.

As such, the horror of this outside is integral to both philosophical and political understandings of subjectivity, and yet, in trying to make sense of Fisher’s suicide within our community, new resonances have emerged with regards to how a political praxis towards the outside might take shape. What is required first is a better understanding of how this horror functions aesthetically, and how this differs from the contemporary processes of political exit that are currently

⁷⁶ Mark Fisher. “Practical Eliminativism”, 105

⁷⁷ Mark Fisher. *Acid Communism*. (Unpublished draft).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

traumatising the left in the form of Brexit and the Donald Trump's declaration of war on the current sociopolitical establishment.

To be continued...

The specifics of the alternatives that Mark hoped to offer us for making the Outside once again libidinally desirable are now lost—although I remain optimistic and look forward to Repeater Books highly-anticipated *Acid Communism* anthology. What is needed now is that we continue to spread Mark's thought in his absence and, in particular, continue to build on that which he has left behind, being careful not to reduce it in his absence.

Whilst this essay, in its original form, continued for a further two chapters, these have since been heavily revisited and the line of thought begun here is to be (and has already been) continued elsewhere, so apologies for the abrupt ending. The second part of this essay, exploring some of the aesthetic precedents of the libidinally desirable Outside, will be posted elsewhere next week. My inchoate thoughts explicitly considering the "Acid" of Fisher's *Acid Communism* have already appeared in various places on this blog.⁷⁹

As Fisher's thought is continually built up and extended—Deontologistics' *Transcendental Blues* remains one of the best recent examples⁸⁰, and I'm anticipating another next week⁸¹—a year on from Mark's death, I am happy to see that this community is continuing to grow. *Xenogoth* will continue to charter its positive dissolutions and advances.

⁷⁹ See various posts under the "Acid" category at *Xenogoth*: <https://xenogoth.wordpress.com/category/acid/>

⁸⁰ Pete Wolfendale, "Transcendental Blues", *Deontologistics*:
<https://deontologistics.wordpress.com/2017/12/22/transcendental-blues/>

⁸¹ On January 19th 2017, Kodwo Eshun will be giving the first annual Mark Fisher Memorial Lecture at Goldsmiths, University of London. Facebook event: <https://www.facebook.com/events/358396317966859/>