

Abstract

This text seeks to read Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* and Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* together in the context of what Marcuse calls the 'society without opposition'. It seeks to extract a conception of hope as method from within these two otherwise rather bleak analyses. This shared conception of hope is understood as the attempt to speak from a conception of capitalism as hell, and to continue to speak anyway. The text concludes by defending a conception of hope that haunts rather than a hope that promises.

Keywords: Marcuse, Fisher, hope, ghosts, hell, capitalism, sky

Society without Opposition: Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* meets Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*¹

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Introduction: The Method of Hell

Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* was published in 1964, under the threat of 'atomic catastrophe'. Marcuse proceeds to unveil how, in industrial societies, irrationality masquerades as technological rationality, and goes on to describe the co-optation and containing of all demands for qualitative change in the light of 'the totalitarian tendencies of the one-dimensional society'.² Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* was published in 2009 in the shadow of dystopian late capitalism, the global economic crisis, and 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'.³ In the forty-five years that separate the two texts, the affinities between them are clear. Both writers push at the very limit of critical thought, describing everything in the starkest terms and yet remaining, despite everything, committed to transforming everything. In this way, then, both texts are exemplary models of writing *without hope, yet continuing to write anyway*. At the end of *One-Dimensional Man*, after noting that '[T]he real face of our time shows in Samuel Beckett's novels',⁴ Marcuse quotes Walter Benjamin writing 'at the beginning of the fascist era': *Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben* – It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us.⁵ Fisher's text concludes with a similarly poetic claim: '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'.⁶

What I want to explore in this short text is the similarities of *method* in both Marcuse and Fisher's work, of what it means to embrace the hellscape of contemporary life in order better to explain it and, from out of the depths of this perdition, to imagine the possibility of something else. Of course, one immediate way of describing what is happening in Marcuse, Fisher and other critical theorists

¹ This essay is dedicated to the memory of Mark Fisher, whose absence will never cease to haunt us.

² Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2007 [1964]), p. 260.

³ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2009), p. 2.

⁴ Marcuse, ODM p. 251.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

⁶ Fisher, CR, p. 81.

(or cultural diagnosticians) is to designate them as ‘dialectical’ thinkers, who are able to bear contradiction, to analyse and describe it, as well as critique it. Marcuse describes his relation to ‘dialectical theory’ in *One-Dimensional Man* in characteristically and necessarily negative terms:

[In the current period] Dialectical theory is not refuted, but it cannot offer the remedy. It cannot be positive. To be sure, the dialectical concept, in comprehending the given facts, transcends the given facts. This is the very token of its truth. It defines the historical possibilities, even necessities; but their realization can only be in the practice which responds to the theory, and, at present, the practice gives no such response. On theoretical as well as empirical grounds, the dialectical concept pronounces its own hopelessness.⁷

Fisher’s description of his own method is perhaps more ambiguous, more ghostly, more affective, in keeping with his emphasis here and elsewhere on the importance of ghosts both positive and negative (Japan’s 1981 track ‘Ghosts of My Life’ was central to Mark’s understanding of his life and his work. The 2014 collection of his essays was titled *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*): ‘Capitalist realism as I understand it cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is 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.’⁸ Do we begin with the object of our critique, or the method we might use to understand it better? What happens when our analysis and our method become the same thing, the same *atmosphere*?

Another way of staying true to the thought that both Marcuse and Fisher share is to shift, perhaps a little perversely, to a religious register – to remember what God says to Saint Silouan the Athonite, a Russian Eastern Orthodox Monk: *keep thy mind in hell and despair not*. This phrase was much beloved of the similarly dialectical thinker Gillian Rose, who used it as the epigraph the text she composed as she was dying of ovarian cancer, *Love’s Work: A Reckoning with Life*.⁹ Marcuse died in 1979, at the age of 81, Rose in 1995, at the age of 48. Fisher, who took his own life on January 13th 2017, was also 48.¹⁰ Hell is a hard place for both the body and the mind. To stay there and to nevertheless have hope, or at least the possibility of ‘not despairing’, is to understand that hell and heaven are not separated by the earth, but are both fully present in it *at all times*. To understand capitalism in such terms is not to concede ground to a religious conception of life, but to understand that capitalism has already consumed all images of the after-life and the life we live, or attempt to live. To live at and with the extremes of thought is to combine the possibility of seeing the worst of what is true with the best of what is possible. To suggest, as both Marcuse and Fisher do, that we live in a ‘society without opposition’, is a call to understand life from the lowest points – the world in the way our oppressors would like us to see it, a world in which ‘there is no alternative’ – and to accept that, even from the standpoint of hell, we also know that ‘human life is worth living, or rather can be and ought to be made worth living’.¹¹ It is worth dwelling on the images of what Beckett called ‘*au temps béni du bleu*’ (‘the blessed days of blue’)¹² in the work of both Marcuse and Fisher, and to understand, in all seriousness, as pop singer Belinda Carlisle did in 1987, that ‘Heaven is a

⁷ Marcuse, ODM, p. 257.

⁸ Fisher, CR, p. 16.

⁹ Gillian Rose, *Love’s Work: A Reckoning With Life*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

¹⁰ Kenneth A. Briggs, ‘Marcuse, Radical Philosopher, Dies’, *The New York Times*, July 31st 1979. Howard Caygill, ‘Gillian Rose, 1947-1995’, *Radical Philosophy*, 77, May/June 1996. Simon Reynolds, ‘Mark Fisher’s K-Punk Blogs were Required Reading for a Generation’, *The Guardian*, 18th January 2017.

¹¹ Marcuse, ODM, p. xli.

¹² Samuel Beckett, ‘Sans’, *Têtes-mortes* (Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), p. 70. The English version is entitled ‘Lessness’ and can be found in *Collected Shorter Prose 1945-1980* (London: John Calder, 1984).

Place on Earth' ('They say in heaven love comes first/We'll make heaven a place on earth/Ooh, heaven is a place on earth').¹³ We should note in passing that Marcuse's description of the society without opposition frequently draws upon the imagery of hell: 'Those whose life is the hell of the Affluent Society are kept in line by a brutality which revives medieval and early modern practices'¹⁴; 'The crimes of society, the hell that man has made for man'¹⁵; 'Materialism ... has a more universal and realistic concept of salvation [than Christianity]. It admits the reality of Hell only at one definite place, here on earth, and asserts that this Hell was created by Man (and by Nature).'¹⁶ Heaven is a place on earth, but so is hell.

But to rest *only* or primarily with horror, exploitation and violence, with depression, inaction, apathy and despair – with hell on earth, the hell that is earth – is to forget that sometimes the sky is not always grey, and even when it is, as Lao-Tzu puts it 'Violent winds do not blow all morning. Sudden rain cannot pour all day. What causes these things? Heaven and Earth. If Heaven and Earth do not blow and pour for long, How much less should humans?'¹⁷ Lao-Tzu's 'Doctrine of Apathy' is not, of course, necessarily the most useful model for revolutionary strategy, and yet there is something between earth and heaven, between the blue and the grey, between pessimism and optimism that means we should always both expect the worse, and hope for the best. And however intractable and permanent our enemies' reign of terror might appear, there is always the possibility that clouds will clear and everything will be transformed, as if for the first time. Images are important. They can help us to answer Marcuse's tortured question: 'how can the administered individuals who have made their mutilation into their own liberties and satisfactions, and thus reproduce it on an enlarged scale - liberate themselves from themselves as well as from their masters?'¹⁸ We are surrounded by images and practice that hurt us, and we forget that we are being hurt. Our escape-routes out of these forms of damage are often the bewildered embrace of yet more damage. And yet, the sky remains. What we imagine the 'sky' to be is up to us.

Marcuse was right, of course, to be profoundly suspicious of 'the triumph of positive thinking', where 'philosophic thought turns into affirmative thought', where linguistic analysis pretends to 'cure thought and speech from confusing metaphysical notions – from "ghosts"'.¹⁹ Just as Fisher was right to remind us that capitalism operates as a 'dark potentiality which haunted all previous social systems'.²⁰ We are today surrounded by exhortations to 'happiness', to 'mindfulness', to 'resilience', to self-monitoring and myriad other forms of individuating imperatives that generate 'reflexive impotence' as Fisher puts it, and 'repressive desublimation', as Marcuse put it, already by the mid-1960s: 'The soul contains few secrets and longings which cannot be sensibly discussed, analyzed, and polled'.²¹ But beyond these fake, unsettling and self-destructive modes of 'happiness' and 'enjoyment', there is still truth and justice, however much these are occluded and taken away by those who not only make us miserable, but also make it feel that is our fault that the world is unbearable. As Fisher puts it:

I want to argue that it is necessary to reframe the growing problem of stress (and distress) in capitalist societies. Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own

¹³ Belinda Carlisle, 'Heaven is a Place on Earth', MCA Records, 1987.

¹⁴ Marcuse, ODM, p. 26.

¹⁵ Marcuse, ODM, p. 65.

¹⁶ Marcuse, ODM, p. 242.

¹⁷ Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), section 23.

¹⁸ Marcuse, ODM, p. 255.

¹⁹ Marcuse, ODM, p. 174.

²⁰ Fisher, CR, p. 5.

²¹ Marcuse, ODM, p. 74.

psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast privatization of stress that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? The “mental health plague” in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high.²²

Hope against Hope

To mention hope, as so often we do at the end of a text which otherwise lays bare the misery of contemporary life, works sometimes to terminate thought. Hope is itself hopeful, and therein lies its attraction as well as its destructive quality. As Lauren Berlant puts it: ‘A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing’.²³ Hope itself can easily function as one of these obstacles, if it becomes an obsessive or fervent desire, without anchor. It is all too easy to dissipate oneself in hope as the relation to a pure future to come, to somehow imagine that the hell we are forced to (or have chosen, however ambivalently, to) keep our minds in, will be resolved in some single, oceanic moment in which all separation between self and other, between the broken fragments of our lives, will be reconciled. But hope is at least as complex as despair, if not more so. Berlant is careful to point out that ‘it would be wrong to see optimism’s negativity as a symptom of an error, a perversion, damage, or a dark truth: optimism is, instead, a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently’.²⁴ Marcuse’s focus in *One-Dimensional Man* is precisely on those forms of the alleviation of misery and semi-freedoms that one-dimensional society appears to offer in the form of entertainment and consumer goods. We may feel that we are being forced to be happy, and this in turn generates yet more misery. In his description of the ‘reflexive impotence’ of the students we were both teaching at the time he was writing the book Fisher points out that ‘[m]any of the teenage students ... seemed to be in a state of what I would call depressive hedonia. Depression is usually characterized as a state of anhedonia, but the condition I’m referring to is constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it by an inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure. There is a sense that “something is missing” - but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed *beyond* the pleasure principle.’²⁵ Nothing is more miserable than being forced to enjoy yourself. So what is hope, detached from false happiness, and viewed from the standpoint of the hellscape? What is hope beyond or from within one-dimensional life and society? Beyond capitalist realism?

On the surface of it, as well as historically, Marcuse’s text has something of an ambivalent relationship to hope. Greeted by such section titles as ‘The Paralysis of Criticism’, ‘The New Forms of Control’, ‘The Closing of the Political Universe’, ‘Negative Thinking: The Defeated Logic of Protest’ and ‘The Catastrophe of Liberation’, one would hardly be forgiven for thinking that the text has very little relation to whatever it is that ‘real’ hope points to: an alternative world, the blessed time of blue, mass uprisings, more sleep. Similarly, Marcuse’s text does not present anything like a practical or strategic guide to revolutionary organising or action. As Douglas Kellner puts it in his Introduction to the text:

While *One-Dimensional Man* became associated with the radicalism of the New Left in the 1960s, the text has a paradoxical relation with the new radicalism whose possibility its

²² Fisher, CR, p. 19.

²³ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁵ Fisher, CR, pp. 21-22.

analyses seem to deny. At the conclusion of the book, Marcuse speculated that there was only a slight chance that the most exploited and persecuted outsiders, in alliance with an enlightened intelligentsia, might mark "the beginning of the end" and signify some hope for social change. He thought there was hope that the civil rights movement might produce ferment which would lead to a new era of struggle, and he held onto the concept of the "Great Refusal" of forms of oppression and domination as his political ideal.²⁶

It is also evident, though, that while Marcuse is highly critical of the Soviet Union, both in *One-Dimensional Man* and in 1958's *Soviet Marxism* (in the former text he asks 'after having attained the goal of "catching up and overtaking," would Soviet society then be able to liberalize the totalitarian controls to the point where a qualitative change could take place?'²⁷), nevertheless we must note that, historically, there were visible political, social and aesthetic alternatives on the horizon, and that Marcuse saw and recognised them as such (albeit as 'alternatives' that were likely to become more repressive). When Fisher writes *Capitalist Realism*, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin wall, he implicitly recognises the shift between the time of his text and the time of Marcuse's: 'Fukuyama's thesis that history has climaxed with liberal capitalism may have been widely derided, but it is accepted, even assumed, at the level of the cultural unconscious'.²⁸ Both Marcuse and Fisher operate, above all, as diagnosticians, as analysts of the bigger picture – less tacticians than seers, of prophets, paying attention to the ghosts, the haunting qualities of hope. Perhaps, in a sense, hope is not something to come, but something behind us, hidden in the shadows, shimmering.

Nothing to Hope for

For Marcuse, hope in the guise of truth is that which we see presented, uncannily, in art and literature, whose antagonistic contents are absorbed by the society without opposition: 'In the realm of culture, the new totalitarianism manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference.'²⁹ The unfulfilled hopes of characters in literature and art revealed a different configuration of truth: 'Their truth was in the illusion evoked, in the insistence on creating a world in which the terror of life was called up and suspended-mastered by recognition.'³⁰ Similarly for Fisher, in the continuing frame of the society without opposition, the age of 'truths in illusions' has continued to be eclipsed, not just by indifference and absorption, but by an even more insidious performance, whereby certain, or even most, cultural products 'perform their anti-capitalism' for us.³¹ Capitalist Realism proceeds without explicitly narrow propaganda – it can indeed operate precisely as Marcuse notes, as a 'harmonizing pluralism'. As Fisher says, 'capitalism can proceed perfectly well, in some ways better, without anyone making a case for it'.³² Hope, too, can perform this role, and yet it also remains 'nothing but a chance'.³³ We should hear in Marcuse's phrase, coming as it does at the end of the book, multiple possibilities – there is no necessity to chance and yet there is nothing *but* chance. Is this the same 'no thing' that 'indicates that it will be a good end'?³⁴ The 'no thing' that haunts the possibility of

²⁶ Douglas Kellner, Introduction to the Second Edition, Marcuse, ODM, p. xxxv.

²⁷ Marcuse, ODM, p. 43.

²⁸ Fisher, CR, p. 6.

²⁹ Marcuse, ODM, p. 64.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

³¹ Fisher, CR, p. 12.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³³ Marcuse, ODM, p. 261.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

hope is hope itself. As Marx puts it in 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', the 'positive' possibility of German emancipation lies:

In the formulation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class [*Stand*] which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere which has a universal character because of its universal suffering and which lays claim to no *particular right* because the wrong it suffers is not a *particular wrong*, but *wrong in general* ... the *total loss of humanity* ... can redeem itself only through the *total redemption of humanity*.³⁵

Fisher's work, in *Capitalist Realism* and elsewhere did much to build upon the history of the revolutionising of the negative, of the 'no thing', the spectre haunting capitalism itself: Fisher's resurrection of the idea of 'hauntology' is central to this project. If hope is a kind of desire, maybe even an aggressive one, a ghost that genuinely frightens as well as points to another world, then we need to imagine how it is possible to merge the 'blessed days of blue', to fuse the sky and the infinite justice it represents, with the sadness of ghosts. In an interview from 2014, Fisher said this:

[D]espondency, or disavowed despondency, is a sign of a craving or hunger to actually belong to something and capitalism not only can't meet that, it doesn't want to meet it. Therefore, part of what I'm doing is trying to bring that underlying negativity to the surface as a means of acknowledging sadness and the causes of that sadness, I think, so that they can be exposed. And then it's about converting depression into anger.³⁶

Hope converted into the understanding of sadness, of the 'no thing' that haunts but reminds us, at the same time, that there is another world, that there are desires that capitalism cannot meet, is the hope of ghosts, of Marcuse's mutilated administered individuals. To commit to ghosts, to the sky, to keep one's mind in hell, which is nothing other than capitalism itself, and nevertheless despair not, however that is possible, is to remember that there are other 'no things' that exist, and that they might also triumph.

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³⁵ Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 256.

³⁶ 'Did You Miss the Future?', Interview with Mark Fisher by Andrew Broaks, *Crack Magazine*, September 2014.

