

**Simon During. *Exit Capitalism: Literary Culture, Theory, and Post-Secular Modernity*. London: Routledge, 2010.**

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**Mark Fisher. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?***

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The two books under review seek, in quite different ways, to diagnose the ideological and cultural stagnation of early twenty-first century capitalism. At a time when neither “left” political parties nor current intellectual movements appear to provide genuine resistance or alternatives, both these books conclude by offering proposals for new ways of conceiving of left-wing politics and the role of intellectuals in their dissemination. Simon During and Mark Fisher identify this new stage of capitalism in which we are living in similar terms – During calls it “endgame” or “no-exit” capitalism, while Fisher adopts and adapts the term “capitalist realism” from the German pop art movement of the 1960s that bears that name. During’s repeated claim that capitalism in its current stage has “become unsupportable at the same time as, and in part because, its crucial structures have become unassailable and its replacement unimaginable” (vii) is shared by both authors, though it is Fisher who makes the stronger attempt at locating this stage’s historical development. Linking his concept of capitalist realism to Fredric Jameson’s famous thesis of postmodernism as “the cultural logic

of late capitalism,” Fisher suggests that “some of the processes which Jameson described and analysed have now become so aggravated and chronic that they have gone through a change in kind” (7). If the postmodernism identified by Jameson in the 1980s developed out of the exhaustion of alternatives to capitalist logic, then capitalist realism marks our contemporary, post-postmodern period in which capitalism’s colonisation of the mind and its capacities for thought have already been fully achieved, so much so that our ability to perceive it as a (recent) historical development has rapidly begun to recede. “For most people under twenty in Europe and North America,” writes Fisher (he could easily have added Australia to the list), “the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue. Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable. Jameson used to report in horror about the ways that capitalism has seeped into the very unconscious; now, the fact that capitalism has colonized the dreaming life of the population is so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment. ... The old struggle between *detournement* and recuperation, between subversion and incorporation, seems to have been played out” (8-9).

If that struggle has been played out, if Capital has proven itself capable of recuperating and pacifying all challenges to its hegemony – including the very rhetoric of anti-capitalism itself, which, as Fisher observes, “is widely disseminated in capitalism” (12) – then the question becomes, how can the critic or diagnostician work both to elaborate the reality of this dire state of affairs, and offer a critique that does not itself accede to this “unasailable” logic? Actually, I am inclined to add a caveat to Fisher’s claim that this old struggle has been “played out,” that all subversions have been incorporated. We do indeed see a version of this struggle enacted constantly, in the discourse of the academic humanities, where the fetishistic fixation on moments and experiences of “subversion” seems to reach ever greater levels of hysteria. As Daring (who is extremely good at tracking such shifts in intellectual history throughout his book) writes, “the celebration of transgression and subversion [has] had a decreasing relation to actual social conditions or political groupings” (113). In this context we find a degraded form of the struggle between subversion and incorporation, what we might call, following Marx, the repetition of tragedy as farce – struggles that once held social and political significance are repeated in pacified form, the transgressive and subversive celebrated as ends in themselves, and almost always as the private experiences of individuals. The struggle between Capital and its others is farcically repeated *from within capitalism*, with resistance to the dominant logic located in the intelligence, experience and fortitude of the superior individual or group, those able to see through the accepted lies, with whom the academic inevitably identifies herself.

How is one to write about capitalism's colonisation of the unconscious, a colonisation that functions by allowing – indeed feeding – the individual's fantasy that her true self resides outside its crushing logic even as her actions support it, without simply positioning oneself as another heroic anti-capitalist intellectual, offering slogans and poses of resistance to the assenting reader? As different as their approaches are, During and Fisher's books should both be commended for the seriousness with which they take this question.

During's *Exit Capitalism* is a curious book, often brilliant in its individual parts but sometimes puzzling with respect to exactly where the whole thing is leading. He sets out his approach in his introduction, stating that “[m]uch of this book, placed in no-exit indirection, explores, from a literary-historical point of view, certain paths through which we have arrived at where we now are” (vii). During sees his book's historical gaze as offering an alternative to what he derides as the fashionable “focus on the contemporary” in cultural studies. And indeed, anyone looking for a book that combines critique of capitalism with irreverent readings of contemporary cultural artifacts will find *Exit Capitalism* rather disappointing – the sheer diversity of topics covered and the depth with which each is explored mean that a reader with no prior interest in, for instance, the relationship between popular literature and the patent medicine trade in eighteenth-century England, or the novels of Christina Stead or Alan Hollinghurst, may struggle to persevere if their only interest in reading the book is to learn a thing or two about the evil ways of capitalism (the kind of stupid book that During and Fisher alike are both determined precisely *not* to write). During is far too sensitive a reader and too diligent a researcher to reduce his readings of these diverse materials to a flat, repeated thesis. Though there are various points where, caught up in the intricacies of the publication history of members of such literary groups as the “Warburtonians,” or the relationship between Pascale Casanova's concept of world literature and Stead's novels, you can start to feel you are a long way from where you thought this book was heading, the truth is that During's central ideas are greatly enriched by his attentive reading of such texts and intellectual histories. The kind of work that Fisher is so good at – diagnosing the workings of late capitalist ideology through sharp, insightful examples drawn equally from high theory and contemporary pop culture, *à la* Žižek – doesn't have much of a role here. During's pronouncement that our endgame capitalism has become at once both unacceptable and inescapable is perfectly sound, but its consequences are not developed beyond that basic assertion.

Instead, During focuses his attentions on two distinct intellectual historical periods – eighteenth-century Britain, where the earlier stages of the

developing relationship between literary production and commerce can be identified; and a series of post-Second World War intellectual movements that have identified themselves in opposition to capitalist hegemony (the “heretic Stalinism” of Stead; British cultural studies in its development from Raymond Williams onward; and the post-1968 Maoist and “post-Maoist” movements in France, including the work of Alain Badiou). This allows him to step back from what he sees as the contemporary bias prevalent in cultural studies, and it also allows him to defer his book’s overall meaning, to let its individual parts develop distinctively and to let readers find their way towards bringing it all back to that central problem of how thought and intellectual work (in the fullest sense) may reach beyond the confines granted by Capital. During’s best reflections on this question come out of his readings of the texts he engages, such as in his discussion of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, whose positing of a dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular (or “the transcendent and the immanent”) leads During to suggest a category of modern experience that seems to fall outside this dichotomy, which he calls the mundane. While the sheer diversity of material may frustrate readers wishing for a cogent, straightforwardly developed argument, and while it is hard not to feel that *Exit Capitalism’s* parts are greater than its whole, During does work to develop certain key ideas across the breadth of his book, while maintaining what he calls the “disciplinary ecumenicalism” so central to his approach.

With *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher has written a more familiar kind of book for those of us used to the ideology-based critique of capitalism for which Žižek’s work is well known. His method certainly bears similarities to Žižek’s, with the emphasis so often on the demonstrative *example*, whether drawn from today’s popular culture or from philosophy and psychoanalysis, which can be used to diagnose a particular cultural malaise. But however strong Žižek’s influence may be, Fisher has achieved something distinct with this book, by virtue of the limited scope he allows himself, as well as the fact that he does dare to offer serious ideas and strategies for how we are to challenge the hegemony of capitalist realism in our everyday working lives. Marshalling an eclectic range of both “pop” and “high” cultural examples, as well as a consideration of the tertiary education and healthcare sectors in today’s Britain, Fisher brings these elements together in an overall depiction of a bleak cultural landscape whose “realism” is profoundly ideological. His closing call for a “far more immanent” politics amongst academics and teachers, one which will replace the “gestural, spectacular politics around (noble) causes like Palestine” (80) with much more direct work to disrupt the acceptance of what Fisher calls “business ontology” and the utter enslavement to bureaucracy, finance and surveillance of the modern

university and other public services, is a powerful one, increasingly applicable to Australia as to the UK. In this emphasis upon the need to think beyond a politics of the heroic anti-capitalist gesture, one that is increasingly susceptible to dissemination within capitalism, Fisher shares something with During, and the serious attention they give to this question stands as one of the major achievements of each of these books.

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