

***Pop Music and Hip Ennui: A Sonic Fiction of Capitalist Realism.* By Macon Holt. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. 208 pp. ISBN 978-1-5013-4666-8.**

At the time of his death in early 2017, Mark Fisher had effectively spearheaded a new moment for cultural criticism in the UK and beyond. His analyses of popular music, film and television past and present were based in strident critique of cultural production under the neoliberal capitalism of recent decades. Embracing continental philosophy and theory yet suspicious of conventional academia and its discourses, Fisher first blogged as 'k-punk,' then gathered together like-minded, often younger writers through the Zero and Repeater publishing labels. His first book *Capitalist Realism* (2009) has been regarded as an epochal diagnosis of an ideological and aesthetic climate in which alternatives to capitalism had been foreclosed. Today, Fisher's work has become a touchstone for a generation of politically minded cultural commentators, many of whom studied under him at Goldsmiths, University of London in the 2010s.

This book, deriving from the author's PhD research at Goldsmiths Centre for Cultural Studies joins Tristram Adams's *The Psychopath Factory: How Capitalism Organises Empathy* (2016) and Matt Colquhoun's *Egress: On Mourning, Melancholy and Mark Fisher* (2020) as a debut monograph by a former student of Fisher's. Fisher was one of Macon Holt's advisors, and the book is dedicated to him. Holt takes up Fisher's interest in the interdependency of ideology and aesthetics, and the contested, often contradictory nature of emancipatory politics in the texts and contexts of the popular sphere. As Holt's preface puts it, 'this book is about the experience of the possibilities and desires popular music can provide while, at the same time, recognizing the involvement of this music in oppressive modes of cultural production' (Holt 2019, p. vxiii). Later, 'this project is one of intensification. Intensification of problematics, intensification of sonic experience and, after Fisher, intensification of the desire of the world to be other than it is' (p. xii). To accomplish this, Holt adds to Fisher's ideas the complementary work of Fisher's friend and colleague Kodwo Eshun, especially Eshun's notion of 'sonic fiction': the mode by which sound and music can imagine and actualise new worlds.

Holt reads and interprets Fisher and Eshun's work in the book's first part, which sets the scene for a second part in which he understands contemporary pop and its consumption through the lenses of a series of related concepts, assigning one per chapter. 'Attention' takes its cues from Anahid Kassabian's concern with the ubiquity of listening (2013), and features some reflections on the shock of the bass in Childish Gambino's 'This is America.' 'Complicity' reflects on the challenge posed by the entanglements between pop as a commodity and the exploitation of labor and materials under global capitalism. 'Catharsis' suggests that pop is offered as a 'salve to... purify us of the negative affects of moving through the world of capitalist realism' (Holt 2019, p. 106), concluding memorably that 'in an environment in which security and relief are both imperatives and difficult-to-attain market commodities, popular music offers a simulation of them at a much lower cost' (p. 127). 'Home,' one of the book's most conceptually inventive chapters, uses Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theorizations of the refrain to describe the sense of comfort that pop can establish or otherwise disrupt, and makes comparisons of Miley Cyrus and FKA Twigs that are detailed and provocative, but that could have benefitted from more of the perspective of feminist criticism. Finally, the multiplicity of pop as a 'Conjunction' serves as the book's conclusion, and the grounds on which Holt discusses

Beyoncé's *Lemonade* and the responses to it. Interspersed within the second part are several imaginatively sourced 'vignettes,' in which Holt briefly reflects and free-associates on a personal experience with pop music tangentially with the section's concepts: Jessie J's over-amplified performance at the Closing Ceremony of the London Olympics in 2012, buskers on the London Underground, Father John Misty's irony-laden performance of 'Bored in the USA,' overhearing the Rolling Stones performing 'Sympathy for the Devil' in Hyde Park from outside the concert area, his disappointed rediscovery of Carly Simon's 'My New Boyfriend' after hearing it in his formative years, and hearing indie band Xiu Xiu perform the *Twin Peaks* theme tune at a cathedral in The Hague.

The book's second part adds to Fisher and Eshun a number of other theorists, including Theodor Adorno, Jacques Attali, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, Sigmund Freud, bell hooks, and Robin James. Holt's use of Deleuze and Guattari across multiple chapters is particularly extensive, to the point of rivalling the book's stated theoretical commitments. Conversely, the 'hip ennui' of the title is only the explicit subject of discussion twice, both times relatively briefly. It comes from *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace ([1996] 2007), whose work and life Holt periodically returns to as insight into life under late capitalism, although it only occurs there as one of two definitions for *Weltschmerz*. This use of Wallace as a companion Fisher is rather effective, and he uses Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* ([1991] 2006) similarly elsewhere, such as in an illuminating passage on its protagonist's justification for his musical tastes in the chapter on 'Complicity' (Holt 2019, p. 90).

The domain of *Pop Music and Hip Ennui* is critical theory rather than popular music studies, and as such the book finds itself in a love-hate relationship with Adorno, and by extension, pop as a whole, that can make its arguments and conclusions difficult to parse. Indeed, Adorno is subsumed with other Frankfurt Schoolers into a category Holt calls 'traditional critical theory (TCT)' which makes generalising critique of their work easier than it should be. The book thus re-opens the Adorno debates of decades ago, and signs of building on the generation of scholars who carefully built cultural criticisms and sociologies of pop(ular) music in the shadow cast by Adorno are sporadic. There are brief and intermittent references to Tia DeNora, Simon Frith, Jeremy Gilbert, Paul Gilroy, and David Hesmondhalgh, and none to Richard Dyer, Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie, Max Paddison, Ben Watson, or, most surprisingly, Stuart Hall. It is not simply that these names must always be invoked, extensively or otherwise, in discussion of the complex emancipatory potential pop(ular) music can have in the belly of commodity capitalism, but that Holt cannot always go beyond what came before, or incorporate the nuance these scholars brought, especially regarding the roles of class, subculture, or irony. Moreover, Holt's use of the terms 'pop' and 'popular music' interchangeably makes for a loose foundation for observations about an implied cultural field extending from Jessie J to the Rolling Stones to Xiu Xiu.

Pop Music and Hip Ennui is at its most valuable when it can update the complexities and anxieties over pop's politics for the twenty-first century, such as in its attention to the acts, technologies and material relations of today. Elsewhere, it offers a fresh articulation of a long-standing yet increasingly pressing challenge in critical theories of popular music.

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