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A Romantic Response to Capitalist Realism

According to Mark Fisher, capitalism has invaded our minds. Entire societies, if not the entire world, may be slaves to the whims of capitalism, a force that can be both antagonistic and friendly—but never vulnerable. Even our usual tools for subversion are useless against capitalist realism. Such a total darkening of collective thought requires a shift of worldview—a true change of perspective—in order to attempt to see beyond the thick clouds of capitalism. A widespread resurgence of certain Romanticist ideals—primarily a belief in the sublime preponderancy of childhood; an attachment to nature, imagination, and emotion as a means of self-betterment and self-determination; and a commitment to undetached sociopolitical critiques of unmitigated urbanization, industrialism, and imperialism—could, if applied both individually and systemically, challenge precorporation and mitigate the social symptoms of pervasive market logic enough to allow societies to progress beyond capitalist realism.

The Romantic view of childhood offers a springboard for visionary conversations about possible life beyond the oppressiveness of capitalism. As part of his dissection of Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*—a film analysis offered as an examination of the cohabitation (both real and cinematically rendered) of “ultra-authoritarianism and Capital”—Mark Fisher posits that today's children and youth are incapable of systemic disruption (2-3), and this argument drives the melancholy that colors Fisher's depictions of capitalist realism. For Fisher, the endless “reiteration and re-permutation” that results from a widespread (if not total) inability to disrupt

capitalist realism causes a “bi-polar oscillation” between naïve, “messianic” hope of political innovation and “the morose conviction that nothing new can ever happen” (3). Though Fisher’s indictment of capitalist systems does not hinge on the inabilities of youth, *Capitalist Realism* frequently revisits Fisher’s initial question: “What happens if the young are no longer capable of producing surprises?” (3). Fisher’s focus on generations—“a whole generation has passed since the collapse of the Berlin Wall”—and his portrayal of “the teenage students [he] encountered” as notable victims of reflexive impotence and widespread depressive hedonia suggests that age is an important variable when analyzing the symptoms of capitalist realism (8, 21). Fisher, it seems, highlights the shortcomings of youth because youth *should* be a cure for the catastrophic “malediction” that is “being lived through” today (2), but modern young people are, in Fisher’s view, as prepared to challenge capitalism as the nonexistent children of Alfonso Cuarón’s dystopian film. If capitalist realism is to be subverted, then, the concept of childhood seems like an appropriate starting point, and Romanticism offers one of the most effectively disruptive social and emotional framings of that topic.

Romanticism’s view of childhood as the sacrosanct epitome of wonder, innocence, and closeness with nature clashes with Fisher’s depictions of children as precorporated slaves to capitalist realism, yet a reframing of the roles and perceptions of youth is necessary to achieve what Fisher describes as poking a “hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism” (81). Romanticism argues that childhood is a “state of innocence, naturalness, purity, spontaneity, goodness, naïve creativeness and wisdom, and closeness to the sublime and the godhead” (Jones 21). Romantic poet William Blake’s “The Ecchoing Green” offers a relatively straightforward depiction of these beliefs: a group of children play in a field, surrounded by nature, as a group of “old folk” watch and reminisce about

their childhoods. The physical and emotional distance between the “little ones” and the “old folk” is representative of Romanticism’s—and specifically Blake’s—frequent juxtaposition of “innocence” and “experience” (as explored more in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*). The last stanza of “The Ecchoing Green” describes the process of losing innocence:

Till the little ones weary
 No more can be merry
 The sun does descend,
 And our sports have an end:
 Round the laps of their mothers,
 Many sisters and brothers,
 Like birds in their nest,
 Are ready for rest;
 And sport no more seen,
 On the darkening Green.

Here, the “Ecchoing Green,” a place of innocent joy and harmony with the natural world, has been replaced by a “darkening Green” as the sun sets and the children are forced to leave their games. Romanticism labels childhood as an “object of increasing social concern and cultural investment” (Rowland 5), and experience (also known as age) prompts the “darkening” of the innocence that is unique to childhood. Viewed through this Romantic lens, the problem of youth is not one of subversive potential preemptively and permanently ripped away by oppressive political and economic systems; the problem is one of innocence lost at the hands of experience. Fisher views capitalist realism as an unconditional status—one that “seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable” for everyone (8), regardless of age—but Romanticism views

sociopolitical maladies as slow-moving (though powerful) forces that disrupt a natural state of purity over time, which implies that certain mindsets and worldviews can exist (however frailly or temporarily) outside the “darkening” grasp of problematic social and political systems. Fisher asserts that all (or at least nearly all) would-be subversive thinking has been subsumed by capitalism. Romanticism claims that, before it succumbs to the oppressiveness of experience, the non-urbanized uniqueness of nature-connected childhood exists purely and subversively in the face of industrialization. The former tempts society to dismiss youth as a solution; the latter suggests that society can weaponize the qualities of childhood against oppressive sociopolitical systems.

Fueled by a desire to preserve childish—here a word with positive connotations—attachments to imagination, naturalness, and innocent wonder, Romanticism encourages critiques of the social, political, and economic trends that threaten innocence. For Romantic-era thinkers, childhood was more than a condition worthy of preservation: it was a lens through which modern conditions and social injustices can be critiqued. Owain Jones notes in “Naturally Not! Childhood, the Urban and Romanticism” that “romantics invested so heavily in symbolisms of childhood because they saw it as a natural state” (21). Romanticism rejects the idea that nature is “a realm of fear and desolation” and instead views the natural world as a “repository of attributes that the romantics turned to as objects of desire in the face of Enlightenment development of rationality, industrialism and urbanism.” Again, William Blake offers a literary depiction of this dynamic. Two pairs of poems, “The Lamb” and “The Tyger” and Blake’s two “The Chimney Sweeper” poems, characterize urban industrialization as a dangerous force that dehumanizes innocence. As a characterization of nature, “The Lamb” and “The Tyger” operate as two sides of the same coin—nature can be both passive and aggressive—but the dangerous qualities of

Blake's tiger are almost always accompanied by mechanical imagery (a hammer, a chain, a furnace, and an anvil), which the poems labels as "deadly terrors." Blake's poems about child chimney sweepers further develop this distain toward industrialization: the *Songs of Experience* version of the poem intensifies the indictment of unmitigated urban industrialization that the *Songs of Innocence* poem establishes. The *Innocence* poem's speaker, an orphaned child chimney sweeper, naïvely experiences hope, but his hope is grounded in the dreamlike idea that conditions will improve after death. The pitiful, misguided optimism of the *Innocence* poem is squashed in the *Experience* poem. As scholar George Norton explains, the "colour palette [of the *Experience* poem] is distinctly monochrome with none of the brightness and green of Tom's dream in the *Innocence* poem; the sweep is depersonalised, a thing." *Slate*'s Robert Pinsky highlights the "significant note of dramatic outrage" apparent in the poems, and he labels the poems as "subversive drama." Norton offers a more pointed reading:

Both Chimney-Sweeper poems show Blake to be a radical critic of the social injustices of his age. His indictment of desperate material conditions and those institutions which perpetuate them is passionate and powerful, but his greatest anger is reserved for the forces – the established Church, mercenary and uncaring parents – that restrict our vision and prevent us from understanding both our oppression and the infinite possibilities of true perception.

Romantics vilified industrial oppression and the institutions—namely religious and social—that attempted to veil those oppressions from the public. Though industrialization and urbanization are not synonymous with capitalism, Fisher's critique of capitalism is married to critiques of industry-adjacent phenomenon, like "consumer bliss," the "entertainment matrix," and "anti-mnemonic blip culture" (24-25). In this way, capitalist realism is related to—perhaps even a

byproduct of—the industrialization, urbanization, and broadly defined imperialism that the Romantics resisted, which means that the logic and fervor of Romantic-era sociopolitical, innocence-focused critiques can easily apply to modern phenomena like capitalist realism. In fact, such modern commentaries already exist.

Echoes of these Romantic-era ideals can be heard in Allen Ginsberg’s 1956 poem *Howl* and the story of *Into the Wild*’s Christopher McCandles, who died in 1992. Both are examples of modern attempts to challenge precorporation and interpassivity. Though Ginsberg’s poem was published prior to the 1980s—a decade that Fisher identifies as important in regard to the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism and from capitalism as a popular option to capitalism as a ubiquitous reality—the poem critiques conformity, materialism, and industrialization with the same type of frustrated anger as William Blake’s poems about child sweepers, and the emotion of *Howl*’s critique of institutions parallels the melancholy of Fisher’s critiques. Ginsberg, who was influenced by Romantic writings, represents industry and consumerism as “Moloch,” a reference to a Canaanite god who is associated with the sacrifice of children—or, as the Romantics would note, the sacrifice of natural innocence. Ginsberg’s lament of this loss of innocence is visceral:

Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and
banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate
is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind!

Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch!

Cocksucker in Moloch! Lacklove and manless in Moloch!

Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness
without a body! Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy!

Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky! (22)

Ginsberg bemoans the loss of “natural ecstasy” at the hands of a seemingly omnipresent industrial force, a godlike system with a technological and market-minded soul that morphs its inhabitants into minds “without a body.” Here, Ginsberg blends Romanticism’s desire to preserve naturalness with Fisher’s poetic descriptions of capitalist realism. When describing the thoroughness of capitalist realism, Fisher’s tone and diction resembles Ginsberg’s: “its cause lies long in the past, so absolutely detached from the present as to seem like the caprice of a malign being: a negative miracle, a malediction which no penitence can ameliorate” (2). Ginsberg’s “Moloch” is the same as Fisher’s “malign being” that threatens Blake’s “innocence.” In an essay titled “A Poetics of Resistance: The Postmodern Ginsberg,” Songok Thornton and William Thornton note that, for Beat Generation poets like Ginsberg, “any anti-establishment revolt would first have to deal with the old avant-garde,” especially considering “the absorption of avant-gardism into establishment values,” and they praise Ginsberg’s “condemnation of modernist irresponsibility” that created no change and his tendency to seek “alterity in the possible worlds of hallucinatory reality.” Aldous Huxley examines these “possible worlds of hallucinatory reality” in *The Doors of Perception*, his nonfiction account of taking mescaline in 1953. Reflecting on his experiences of looking at some furniture legs, he remarks:

. . . we may now return to the miraculous facts—four bamboo chair legs in the middle of a room. Like Wordsworth’s daffodils [the subjects of Wordsworth’s Romantic Period poem], they brought all manner of wealth—the gift beyond price, of a new direct insight into the very Nature of Things, together with a more modest treasure of understanding in the field, especially, of the arts. A rose is a

rose is a rose. But these chair legs were chair legs were St Michael and all angels.

(14)

As Huxley describes, alternate perceptions of reality are available to the human mind. Ginsberg attempts to reach these through actionable, kaleidoscopic prose. Christopher McCandless attempted to reach these through complete detachment from materialism and consumerism. In his novelized account of McCandless's life, author Jon Krakauer describes the image of McCandless in his last photograph before his death in the Alaska wilderness: "Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God" (199). Like Ginsberg and Blake, McCandless rejected urban industrialization. Like Ginsberg and Huxley, McCandless sought out an alternative existence. Like Fisher, McCandless "possessed a streak of stubborn idealism that did not mesh readily with modern existence," as Krakauer describes in his note at the beginning of his book. McCandless, a physical embodiment of the Romantic ideas presented by Ginsberg and Blake, challenges Fisher's notion that "action is pointless" (3). Perhaps, with the appropriate—arguably Romantic—focus, subversion is possible, first on an individual level and later a systemic level.

Fisher's assertion that popular culture is incapable of subversion—that supposedly counter-cultural works "don't designate something outside mainstream culture; rather, they are styles . . . within the mainstream"—is mistakenly hyper-focused on arguably aggressive and thematically loud forms of would-be subversive art, like Nirvana, gangster rap, and gangster movies like "*Scarface*, *The Godfather* films, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Goodfellas*, and *Pulp Fiction*" (9-11). Fisher's focus on these types of art ignores the possibility of more understatedly subversive works. Fisher is correct that most forms of art have been colonized by capitalism, but he neglects to notice those few examples of art that may break through the surface of capitalist ideologies,

even unintentionally. In the world of video games, many (if not most) products match Fisher's description of art. Many games are models and simulations of capitalist behavior. Massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) often feature in-game mechanics that simulate consumer markets. Open-world and level-based games often feature "grinding" for new materials, weapons, or prizes. Even Callum Friend, in an essay arguing for the possible anti-capitalist nature of video games, notes that any supposedly anti-capitalist AAA game "must sell itself in order to make a profit, thus maintaining the existence of the capitalist enterprise that created it." Anne Allison observes a similar blending of "intimacy and commodification" in Japanese franchises like Pokémon. Friend continues: "This dynamic naturally disincentives the alienating effect on the player necessary for the denaturalisation of capitalist ideology." (Friend specifically criticizes Fisher, arguing that Fisher's primary claim regarding the impossibility of imagining a non-capitalist reality implies "the existence (not figuratively but actually so) of an amorphous general consciousness of people. This is a basically idealist claim, one without empirical support, and one that ignores the non-homogeneity of individuals' material conditions under capitalism." This critique has merit, but it has limited value here.) However, games like *Flower*, a simple game designed by independent video game developer Thatgamecompany, offer an experience that naturally undermines capitalist norms. Consider this description of *Flower* from the game developer's website:

The game exploits the tension between urban bustle and natural serenity. Players accumulate flower petals as the onscreen world swings between the pastoral and the chaotic. Like in the real world, everything you pick up causes the environment to change. Its simplicity allows for anyone to play and feel in complete zen and be

uplifted by the game. By using the motion controller, players can control their direction and lead the way across the fields.

Flower is not an intentionally subversive game, but it nonetheless resists the pull of capitalism. Moreover, *Flower* strips away capitalist behaviors and forces the player to focus individually on a serene environment. Mark Fisher argues that, because moral critiques of capitalist realism are inadequate, the only way to combat capitalist realism may “involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us (16-18). Given the oppressive completeness of capitalist realism’s appropriation of social consciousness, according to Fisher, intentional subversion will perhaps always fail because its existence is melded to the thing it challenges. Human beings are largely incapable of seeing the Real from our capitalist viewpoint. It seems, then, that a drastic change of perspective is needed to challenge capitalist realism. With its shift away from materialist rationality and urbanization, Romanticism offers an alternative viewpoint, and games like *Flower* act as a tool to achieve that viewpoint. Romantic art, specifically the “transcendent landscapes” of Romantic painters, challenged “the subordination of nature to man implicit in traditional classical landscape” (Vaughan 132-133). Romantic landscapes, like those of *Flower*, were created in alignment with Immanuel Kant’s notion that “the contemplation of nature can provide the deepest moments of self-discovery” (134). Romantic artists like J. M. W. Turner and Caspar David Friedrich embraced the “overwhelming” paradox of “man’s yearning for the infinite and his perpetual separation from it” (142, 158). In other words, Romantic art, literature, and philosophy acknowledge some limitations but ultimately reject confinement in social systems or emotional norms. An ideological subscription to Romanticism is a subscription to a rebellion that simultaneously intentional and subconscious. Romanticism offers social critique but *focuses* on an endless journey *toward* innocence and sublime nature. The “tension

between urban bustle and natural serenity” found in *Flower* is quintessential Romanticism, and the game therefore creates a mindset that may allow visionary thoughts that extend beyond capitalist realism. In a capitalist world where most intentionally subversive art fails to achieve its goals, perhaps truly subversive behavior can be unintentional. Romanticism cannot defeat, replace, or even minimize the impacts of capitalist realism, but it can offer the type of imaginatively non-commercial mindset needed to envision possibilities beyond the status quo.

Romanticism can operate as a needle used to poke through capitalist realism in order to see (and possibly begin to address) the Real, as described by Fisher. Environmental disaster and widespread mental health issues are, according to Fisher, “traumatic void(s) that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality” (18). Both catastrophes have been warped by capitalism to the point of being unfathomable as genuine disasters worthy of immediate and drastic action. Environmental issues have been “incorporated into advertising and marketing,” and mental health issues have been privatized and labeled as individual problems with individual solutions (18-19). Romanticism offers no solutions to these issues. Romanticism has no answer for the Real. However, Romanticism *does* offer the opportunity to see the Real long enough to address it—and perhaps long enough to attempt to unshackle societies from capitalist realism. Mark Fisher’s largely bleak assessment of the “very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism” acknowledges the conceivable existence of “alternative political and economic possibilities” that can “tear a hold in the grey curtain” that has blinded political and economic thinkers since the 1980s (80-81). Romantic-era thought shifts the mind away from urbanization, industrialism, consumerism, and materials and instead places value on imagination, sublime naturalness, innocence, and beauty. Romanticism offers an indictment of capitalist assumptions. Romanticism values childhood and youth as ideological

concepts that inherently challenge the precorporated status quo, not as a designation of a less-than period of life. Materialism and socioeconomic ills are products of experience and adulthood, so truly productive adults are those, like Christopher McCandless, who abandon the trappings of industrialized experience and instead reconnect with the true source of rebellion against unnatural conditions: childlike innocence.

Fisher began *Capitalist Realism* with an analysis of *Children of Men*—arguing that, unlike most dystopian films that feature “familiar totalitarian scenario[s]” (1), *Children of Men* is about late capitalism—so offering a similarly dystopian example of Romanticism as a means of shifting paradigms seems appropriate. Bong Joon-ho’s 2013 film *Snowpiercer* serves this purpose well. In the post-apocalyptic film, the natural world seems uninhabitable, so citizens live on train that perpetually travels around a snow-filled landscape. The impoverished citizens at the end of the train rebel and attempt to travel toward the more luxurious front of the train. *Medium*’s Matthew James offers this analysis:

In contrast to the rest of the train, it is the middle section where windows furnish every cart . . . this giving the impression that the middle class of the train are the most similar to capitalist society. The scene that demonstrates this difference the best is when the group come upon the school cart. . . . The children showing sense of hope that there still is a hope for the future, even the teacher herself being pregnant. . . . the middle class aren’t single-mindedly looking in one direction like the other classes but have the ability . . . to see the world outside of the train as being part of their home.

When hyper-focused on social mobility, societies cannot see beyond the unnatural tracks that provide direction up or down. Critiques of the capitalist systems that allow social mobility may,

at best, minimally alter the style or tone of the system, but they cannot alter the system itself. It is only by looking “outside of the train” that the status quo may be truly challenged. Romanticism does not offer solutions for the ills of capitalist realism, but it does offer a different vantage point from which to view capitalism’s problems—and that shift of perspective may be enough to address the Real and envision a reality beyond capitalist realism.

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