

Book reviews

Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*. London: Repeater Books, 2016. 134 pp.
US\$14.95.

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The intellectual world was dealt a crushing blow on 13 January 2017, when Mark Fisher took his own life after a long struggle with depression. Already a massive influence in the radical blogosphere under his long-time moniker ‘k-punk’, Mark’s 2009 book *Capitalist Realism* did not just shape the theoretical vocabulary of a new generation of critical theorists – his book achieved that rare feat of crossing over from the domain of academic theory to a much wider audience. With celebrities like Russell Brand championing his book in the public sphere and radical theorists across a wide spectrum of disciplines quickly embracing ‘capitalist realism’ as a basic framework, it is difficult indeed to overstate his influence as a contemporary thinker.

By the same token, it is now a sad and difficult task to go about reviewing what will now tragically remain Mark Fisher’s last book, *The Weird and the Eerie*. The tragedy of his untimely death now looms inescapably over every page of the actual book, transforming what was clearly meant to be a somewhat minor diversion into an unintended final statement. And as if that shadow is not enough, this newest book also hangs awkwardly between the previous accomplishment of his universally acclaimed *Capitalist Realism* and the ‘magnum opus’ he had been working on that will now forever remain unfinished, *Acid Communism: On Post-Capitalist Desire*.

In many ways, *The Weird and the Eerie* has much more in common with his lesser-known collection *Ghosts of My Life* (2014). In this previous book, two forceful and hugely focused new essays appeared alongside a variety of shorter pieces, many of which had been developed on his k-punk blog, and which were obviously more scattershot in terms of topic and direction. While we are lucky indeed to have with that book a printed anthology of Fisher’s notoriously ephemeral blogging, his most obvious strengths as a fiercely energetic commentator reflecting on cultural movements as they develop are better served by digital media than by the book form. While *The Weird and the Eerie* vividly again demonstrates the author’s political fervour and infectious eclecticism, the text as a whole combines Fisher’s omnivorous cultural sensibilities with a strongly focused conceptual framework that is highly definitional in nature.

As he sets out with typical clarity and elegance in the introduction, the book offers an elaborate discussion of the styles, registers and/or effects that one might describe as 'weird' or 'eerie'. Both terms obviously resonate strongly across most forms of fantastic fiction, where the 'New Weird' has become a politically charged movement across sf/f literature, while the eerie presence/absence of digital life has given new forms to the Gothic ghost tales traditionally marked as 'eerie'. Both distinct and relatable, Fisher establishes both terms in relation to Freud's original *unheimlich* or 'uncanny', setting them up as a trio of terms to describe something that is both affect and mode, but also 'not quite' a genre (9).

Engaging then directly with his two central terms, Fisher again defines his main concepts with almost brutal clarity and efficiency: the weird should be understood as that '*which does not belong*', most commonly finding expression in 'the conjoining of *two or more things which do not belong together*' (10–11). The eerie, on the other hand, indicates a different type of affect – one that is not so much about the terrifying intrusion of something that does not belong, but more often with a frightening absence where one would expect a presence. However, while one might be tempted to see them as opposites that function along the traditional presence/absence binary, Fisher's definition is more nuanced, more slippery than my own oversimplification would allow.

Following his brisk introduction, which simultaneously emphasises both terms' political charges, the rest of the book is divided into two sections, each of which offers a series of short case studies that illustrate different aspects of these two central terms. Roughly chronological in organisation, the sections' respective sets of six chapters read like a kind of unintentional cultural history of the concept's key textual manifestations. For the weird, this overview begins with Lovecraft and ends with David Lynch, passing by provocative cross-media works by H.G. Wells, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Philip K. Dick and others along the way.

Then, in perfect symmetry, Fisher tackles the eerie in six short chapters that again combine his acute theoretical insight with perceptive and compulsively readable analyses. Throughout these discussions, the two primary modes that define the eerie – either a '*failure of absence*' or a '*failure of presence*' (61) – are illustrated in a number of different ways. As in the book's first section, the chapters do not so much build on each other as give Fisher occasion to bring out aspects of his typically diverse and varied assortment of primary texts. And in many cases, the interplay between the examples brought together within a single essay adds greatly to their overall impact: combining Margaret Atwood's 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake* with Jonathan Glazer's film *Under*



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the Skin (2013), for instance, teases out some new angles in these otherwise familiar works.

But while each of these short chapters is engaging, perceptive and fun to read, there remains a lingering sense that the book as a whole is somehow less than the sum of its parts. To some extent at least, this is because neither term is given a real sense of urgency. The introduction gestures towards their political relevance: ‘the perspective of the eerie can give us access to the forces which govern mundane reality but which are ordinarily obscured, just as it can give us access to spaces beyond mundane reality altogether’ (13). But somehow this political angle is little more than an undercurrent in the various case studies.

Moreover, Fisher’s wide variety of primary texts, ranging from literary classics to 1980s post-punk-rock albums, obviously does not cohere into anything resembling a cultural trend or movement, instead locating both the weird and eerie in occasional and seemingly discrete moments. Readers hoping for the kind of theoretical intervention that relates more directly to the on-going ‘New Weird’ movement in fantastic literature may therefore be disappointed

by this publication, which includes no mention of prominent contemporary authors such as China Miéville, Jeff VanderMeer or K.J. Bishop. Instead, the book's insistence on locating these two modes, affects and not-quite-genres seemingly everywhere ends up diluting their impact and resonance.

Nevertheless, *The Weird and the Eerie* is a book that is hard not to recommend. Fisher's unmatched talents as a writer and critic whose prose was clear, concise and completely controlled are on full display throughout these essays, as is his uncanny ability to mix and match theoretical concepts with cross-media case studies that are somehow just right. So even if it is not the final masterpiece many still grieving his untimely death will have been hoping for, we may also be grateful for this last published work by one of the twenty-first century's greatest critical thinkers.



Aaron John Gulyas, *The Paranormal and the Paranoid: Conspiratorial Science Fiction Television*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015. xv+178 pp. US\$75.00 (hbk)

Sherryl Vint

Aaron John Gulyas's *The Paranormal and the Paranoid* offers an in-depth exploration of 1990s television culture, focused on that era's most well-known show, *The X-Files* (US 1993–2002, 2016–). By focusing so clearly on the 1990s, and especially by discussing some lesser known texts that quickly disappeared from the airwaves such as *Nowhere Man* (1995–6) and *Dark Skies* (US 1996–7), the book enables us to see how pervasive was the atmosphere of paranoia that shaped sf of the period. It thus provides a vividly detailed snapshot of the state of the sf televisual imagination just before events of 9/11 transformed this landscape. It brings to light how strongly the connection between the paranoid and the paranormal shaped this cultural moment, showing that the distinctive mix of supernatural monsters and government conspiracy that emerged from *The X-Files* became part of a widely shared sensibility across 1990s televisual texts. The book thus offers a timely reflection on a decade whose sensibility was quickly swept away as the new millennium began, and opens up space for reflections on the differences between the 1990s and early twenty-first century television, in which both the supernatural and conspiracy theories abound but segregated between fantasy shows about vampires and witches or near-future dystopias of environmental and economic collapse. The real strength of the book lies, however, in its extensive historicisation of conspiracy and the