

Print Run

New music books

Free Jazz Communism: Archie Shepp-Bill Dixon Quartet At The 8th World Festival Of Youth And Students In Helsinki 1962

Sezgin Boynik, Taneli Viitahuhta (Editors)
Rab-Rab Press Pbk 200 pp

Among the merits of what historians call microhistory – in essence, the study of ordinary individuals or single events – is the recognition that looking closely at small things opens the widest historical vistas. I'm not sure *Free Jazz Communism* counts as a microhistory, exactly, but as deep-dive documentation and analysis of a single gig, it surely partakes in some of the same principles – not least in its powerful and surely correct conviction that a single musical performance at a given time and place might be seen as a crossing point for multiple historical currents, all of which could be teased out and illuminated afresh by close examination.

The gig in question was the appearance of the Archie Shepp-Bill Dixon Quartet at the Eighth World Festival of Youth and Students, a huge Soviet sponsored event

which took place in Helsinki, Finland, in late July and early August 1962. The festival itself was an enormous gathering of socialist youth organisations and anti-colonial liberation groups from around the world, in a huge show of anti-capitalist and anticolonial solidarity, with over 15,000 delegates in attendance. Taking place at the height of the Cold War – the Cuban missile crisis would unfold just a few months later – in the ostensibly neutral territory of Finland, the festival was an intense field of operations for both the USSR and the US. Such was CIA concern about the event that an alternative counter-festival entitled Young America Presents was hurriedly created to run alongside the main festival, featuring an exhibition of abstract expressionist painting, and an appearance from Jimmy Giuffrè. Less salubrious but no less typical counter-measures involved encouraging provocateurs, fascists and bikers to beat up festival delegates.

Dixon and Shepp arrived in late July; Cecil Taylor had been due to accompany

them but had in the end cried off after a dispute about billing order. Their visit had been arranged by the festival organisers and the US Communist Party, who were working on the cultural programming. The funds for the trip were raised through a series of concerts, and the travelling quartet was completed by drummer Howard McRae and bassist Don Moore. In the event, the group played as a quintet, with Shepp and Dixon inviting the clarinettist Perry Robinson, who had made his own way to Finland, to play with them. They played the scheduled gig at the festival, a set of just four tunes. The performance was panned as unmusical in the Finnish jazz press; Giuffrè by contrast got generally good notices. In subsequent days they played a few more shows and open air concerts before going in different directions – Dixon and company to Sweden where they connected with Albert Ayler, Shepp onwards to the Soviet Union. And that was that.

Free Jazz Communism sets about untangling the many threads that

Egress: On Mourning, Melancholy, And Mark Fisher

Matt Colquhoun

Repeater Pbk 312 pp

Pop Music And Hip Ennui: A Sonic Fiction Of Capitalist Realism

Macon Holt

Bloomsbury Hbk 224 pp

On Friday 13 January 2017, culture theorist, blogger and *The Wire* contributor Mark Fisher made his exit from the world of the living. His death left a deep and indelible wound in many communities, including the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he lectured. In the opening pages of *Egress: On Mourning, Melancholy, And Mark Fisher*, Matt Colquhoun, then a postgraduate student at Goldsmiths, describes the surreal gutpunch of learning of it while checking Twitter on a study break.

The announcement had been tweeted out by Repeater Books, the publishing imprint Fisher had co-founded with Tariq Goddard in 2014. Two weeks after Fisher's suicide, Repeater published his final book, *The Weird And The Eerie*. Like *Blackstar*, the album David Bowie dropped just days before dropping his final mask one year prior, *The Weird And The Eerie*'s release was haunted by an author who had already disappeared.

The "eerie" is, according to Fisher, a sensation that emerges either when there's "something present where there should be nothing", or "nothing present where there should be something". The "weird", in contrast, is marked by an "exorbitant presence, a teeming which exceeds our capacity to represent it". The weird is notable, Fisher wrote in a chapter on Lovecraftian horror, "for the way in which it opens up an egress between this world and others".

This concept of egress, with its capacity to admit radical otherness into seemingly closed systems, provides inspiration for two new works by Goldsmiths alumni, each carrying a different candle lit by the Fisher torch. Macon Holt's *Pop Music And Hip Ennui: A Sonic Fiction Of Capitalist Realism* overlays Fisher's concept of capitalist realism, in which our "horizons of possibility" are limited by neoliberal inevitability, with the liberatory possibilities of "sonic fictions" as theorised by Fisher's friend and colleague at Goldsmiths, Kodwo Eshun, with the goal of understanding how the latter might be used to break through the former. "Music is meant to make you feel something," writes Holt. "It is thick with affective potential, which is just what is needed to cut through the sludge of enlightenment rationalism as ideology; to be made aware of our bodied existence."

But in the contemporary attention economy, most pop music – the ubiquitous music that is "streamed but not owned" – is engineered to rewire our aesthetic/emotional pathways to foster complacency through an atmosphere of placatory numbness. "Through no action of your own," Holt writes, "you are now in a position, right here in this mall, in this bar, on our laptop, of absorbing material specifically tailored to produce desire conducive to the accumulation of capital. This always sounds so conspiratorial, but it isn't," he insists, citing Tia DeNora's research on shopping mall marketing as an empirical example.

Holt's hip ennui is an aesthetic that expresses just enough knowingness or discontent with this libidinal economy to offer a bit of catharsis, or what Adorno termed "substitute satisfaction", without actually posing a threat to its order. In his estimation, it is possible for pop music to point toward new possibilities, but in order to do so, it must consciously push up against its own categorical

Two new books grapple with the intellectual legacy of **Mark Fisher** in his pursuit of community.
By **Emily Pothast**

Archie Shepp-Bill Dixon Quartet in Helsinki, 1962



are woven together in this deceptively modest event. Marshalling historical essays, contemporary reviews and texts, personal recollections, new interviews and theoretical academic arguments, it makes a strong case that Dixon and Shepp's presence at the festival can be seen as a crucible where multiple strands in global politics, culture and history can be found running through each other. In play are both local developments (the way that jazz was received in Finland), and grander problems (the complex presence of jazz within Cold War theatres, the anti-war internationalism of Shepp, the black radical tradition and the wider political significance of free jazz).

Three searing texts from Shepp and a new interview with him are the centrepiece. Shepp is already a towering figure, of course, but in focusing closely on work, politics and thought, a book like this prompts one to wonder again how long it will be before he and his generation really get all their dues.

Francis Gooding

boundaries. In a nuanced reading of Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, Holt tempers bell hooks's critique of the video-album as "capitalist money making at its best" with Zandria Robinson's sociological assessment that "Formation" is ultimately "a black feminist, black queer, and black queer feminist theory of community organising and resistance". That something so profitable and spectacular could also help reframe notions of community is an example of the power of pop to seed the public imagination with liberatory, even subversive potential.

Colquhoun, meanwhile, has written a very different sort of book framed by his personal experience of the community forged at Goldsmiths after the egress of Fisher's death. Writing in a voice reminiscent of Fisher's heady vernacular, yet softened by his own insights, Colquhoun describes the process of calling a mental health counselling number at Goldsmiths and being shunted through an automated, outsourced system which compounded the very feelings of trauma and detachment it was ostensibly aimed at ameliorating.

Here, he recounts one of the most critical observations of Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, in which Fisher depicts mental illness as a systemic failure which masquerades as an individual issue in order to simultaneously reinforce alienation and sell us solutions. The antidote to the alienating hyper-atomisation of capitalist realism is the kind of transcendental camaraderie alluded to by the title of Fisher's unfinished work *Acid Communism* – a radically inclusive sense of community capable of dissolving the hard boundaries imposed by neoliberal individualism. Borrowing a term from the writer Natasha Eves, Colquhoun characterises the desire Fisher often articulated as a longing for "solidarity without similarity".

One of the more tragic aspects of Fisher's career, touched on by Colquhoun but worthy of even deeper analysis if we're ever to realise his dream of acid communism, was his tendency to sometimes draw his own exclusionary lines with one hand while furiously typing out calls for "comradship and solidarity" with the other. As Owen Hatherley notes in a recent multi-author conversation for the *Sydney Review Of Books* on Fisher's formative influence on the blogosphere, "Mark did excommunicate people." This tendency was, at times, directly at odds with fostering the kind of community he desperately wanted to create.

If Fisher's ability to issue swift, silver-tongued judgments is what made him an incisive critic, sometimes it also got in the way of finding common ground with those with whom he clashed. This tension is given its full expression in 2013's "Exiting The Vampire Castle", identified by Colquhoun as Fisher's "most controversial essay". Here, Fisher caricatured the women discussing Russell Brand's sexism in his social media circles as "vampires", detailing the loathsome, infected desires that he imagined to motivate them.

He then went on to issue a wholesale dismissal of feminism and critical race studies as "identitarian essentialism", largely misconstruing their arguments and conflating them with the cynical machinations of capitalist interests that weaponise notions of "privilege" in order to "contaminate our movement". Fisher concluded his scathing exhortation of the "febrile McCarthyite atmosphere fermented by the moralising left" by calling for "conditions where disagreement can take place without fear of exclusion and excommunication" – as if he hadn't just spent the past 4000 words drawing battle lines.

"Rather than see how he is engaging in his own brand of identity politics," wrote Peter Frase in his

critique of the essay for *Jacobin*, "Fisher bizarrely uses this episode to prop up the notion of class as something that transcends identity." Citing Robin DG Kelley's understanding of class as "lived through race and gender", Frase points to an embodied, experiential understanding of class that is more theoretically robust and far less exclusionary.

To fully grasp the implications of class as not only inextricable from but mutually constructed with other dimensions of lived experience, which include race and gender as well as things like mental illness and trauma, is to wield the only tool truly capable of cutting through the "grey curtain" of capitalist realism. "Solidarity without similarity" is a worthwhile goal, but as long as implicit bias and hegemonic power relationships determine who is consistently asked to subordinate their own humanity to someone else's comfort, the result is what Kimberlé Crenshaw calls "asymmetrical solidarity". The organising powers of capital haven't really been transcended, they've just been given a cathartic outlet, a substitute satisfaction, as it were. To transcend them, we must cultivate a sense of trust in a communal ethic strong and flexible enough to allow for actual difference to express itself in the safety of radical commitment to one another.

Colquhoun doesn't quite arrive at this conclusion, but he gestures toward it with his suggestion that "love and queerness, as an entanglement of desiring relations, demonstrate ways in which such a paradoxical thinking is nonetheless within our reach". To identify love with egress, an exit wound through which our world may be permeated with radical otherness, is to make a bold and decisive move toward the sort of solidarity that Fisher spent his life dreaming toward, but couldn't realise alone. □