



**Title**

Haunted Realism

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**Article DOI****Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/haunted-realism>

**ISSN**

2631-5661

**Cite as**

Juliet Jacques: 'Haunted Realism', *Burlington Contemporary* (14th July 2022), <https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/haunted-realism>

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Cover image:

# Haunted Realism

by Juliet Jacques • 14.07.2022

In a *Film Quarterly* article in 2012, Mark Fisher wrote that the concept of 'hauntology gained its second (un)life in the middle of the last decade'.<sup>1</sup> He focused on electronic music and the idea that by the mid-2000s it could no longer deliver 'futuristic' sounds, as it had since the end of the Second World War, but had instead 'succumbed to its own inertia and retrospection'.<sup>2</sup> For Fisher, what haunted such 'digital cul-de-sacs' was 'not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate' – an idea that has many applications beyond music.<sup>3</sup> Fisher was inspired by Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx* (1993), which riffed on the opening of Marx's and Engels's manifesto of the Communist Party: 'A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism'.<sup>4</sup> Coining the term hauntology to refer to the return or persistence of aspects of the political or cultural past thought to have been buried, Derrida argued that the communal possibilities raised by Marx and Engels and explored during the twentieth century would not just collapse with the Soviet Union, as such triumphalist liberals as Francis Fukuyama hoped. Rather, despite the disasters and disappointments that happened in Marx's name, they would still be explored for as long as inequality – liable to be amplified by the free market dogma of the Cold War victors – persisted.

Fisher's book *Capitalism Realism* was published in 2009, just after the financial crash that looked like it would bring down the neoliberal orthodoxy. Responding to Fredric Jameson's idea that 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism', Fisher diagnosed how this ideology had entrenched itself and suggested ways to unpick it.<sup>5</sup> Looking to remnants of the past for the basis of a brighter future, Fisher arrived at an optimistic conclusion: 'The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect [. . .] From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly everything is possible again'.<sup>6</sup> What would Fisher, who took his own life in January 2017, have made of the Left's electoral fortunes later that year, when Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise made surprisingly strong showings on socialist, or at least social democratic platforms, and the subsequent crushing of left populism? Moreover, what would he have thought of his canonisation as 'the late, great Mark Fisher', with his 'Exiting the vampire castle' essay frequently referenced by commentators – who, in some cases, he openly despised – in order

to attack the Left?<sup>7</sup> What would he think of Gagosian, one of the world's largest commercial art galleries, opening a group exhibition titled *Haunted Realism* FIG.1 in west London?<sup>8</sup>

Referencing *Capitalist Realism* and Fisher's final book, *The Weird and the Eerie* (2016), the focus of *Haunted Realism* is 'a sense that the aspirations of modernity are now "lost futures" – perceptible only as ghostlike traces of their original formations'. There are thirty artists included in the exhibition, the majority of whom are contemporary, with recent works shown alongside older ones, and there are no curatorial groupings or divisions by style or subject. The show veers between optimism and pessimism but stays melancholic throughout – both about a future likely to be shaped by a volatile present, and about how continual decline forces us to recast past times that felt dismal as a lost golden age. These artists, we are told in the press release, are reacting to the 'accelerated flow of images in contemporary media culture' and related difficulty in believing 'apparently documentary "truths" of realism'. One work that stands out is *September* (2009) by Gerhard Richter (b.1932), a semi-abstract painting of the twenty-first century's most recognisable, reproduced images: the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 11th September 2001. Smoke billows out of the Twin Towers and streaks of grey paint represent the aeroplanes, with triangular shapes at the end alluding to their tail fins.



**Fig. 1** Installation view of *Haunted Realism* at Gagosian, Grosvenor Hill, London, 2022. (Courtesy Gagosian; photography Lucy Dawkins).

Karlheinz Stockhausen, one of the twentieth century's most influential electronic composers, said he was misquoted as calling 9/11 'the greatest work of art [. . .] in the entire cosmos' – which would be a patently crass, tasteless comment.<sup>9</sup> But here, by defamiliarising this ubiquitous image, Richter reminds us of the



terrorists' mastery of media culture: in a world just beginning to shift away from the dominance of one-too-many broadcast channels towards apparently more open, democratic online platforms, the orchestration of the attacks transcended any exhaustion with the visual image. The event instantly conveyed to the world that Fukuyama's 'end of history' had ended, with the return of global conflict between two large blocs. We moved into a new political era, characterised as a 'clash of civilisations' rather than of ideologies – the ghost of religious fundamentalism had returned to haunt the West.



**Fig. 2** *The Birth of Melpomene*, by Jim Shaw. 2022. Acrylic, oil and mixed media on muslin, 152.4 by 152.4 by 27.3 cm. (© Jim Shaw; courtesy Gagosian; photograph Jeff McLane; exh. Gagosian, Grosvenor Hill, London).

The 2008 financial crisis, which signalled an equally seismic economic shift, is less directly addressed. One notable work is *The Birth of Melpomene* **FIG.2** by the American artist Jim Shaw (b.1952), which contrasts a post-war concrete office block with a contemporary glass one, showing a young businessman smiling and an older one crying, over a sky-blue backdrop. Combining painting and collaged elements, it is beautifully realised, if a touch crude. A second painting by the artist, *I Tried to Tell You, But the Words Got in the Way* (2021), is perhaps a more intriguing image, showing a woman at a typewriter opposite a man with a hand bursting out of his face, with keyboard letters slipping through its fingers. It has a simple stylistic clarity that recalls the paintings of René

Magritte, highlighting that the spectre haunting this exhibition, further emphasised by the inclusion of two small Man Ray photographs, is not communism but Surrealism.

Arguably, Surrealism ought to be inseparable from communism, given the desire of such leading figures as André Breton and René Crevel not just to reconfigure aesthetics but to revolutionise politics. Visually, Glenn Brown's striking *You Take My Place in This Showdown (after 'The Great Masturbator', 1929 by Salvador Dalí)* **FIG.3** derives from the work of a Surrealist who supported the far-right. It does not advocate Dalí's politics, but in its retrospection, suggests that the best way to find new artistic directions may be to return to the forms developed during the 1920s and start again. In this, it raises the question of whether Surrealism keeps resurfacing in popularity because of the power of its vision and style, especially as the movement's painters and film-makers retain a far larger audience than its poets and novelists. Less charitably, one might ask if it is because no movement since has been comparably imaginative, or whether it is because the separation of Surrealist aesthetics and the politics of its founders is not too difficult for contemporary viewers. Urs Fischer's *Thinking Moon* (2019) more subtly references one of the better-known Surrealist literary works, Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928). Using rough strokes of blue, orange, pink and white paint to adorn a close-up photograph of an eyeball, with all the veins visible, it hints not only at the novella's visceral sexuality, but the various possibilities that come with transfiguring one's vision, literally or intellectually.



**Fig. 3** *You Take My Place in This Showdown (after 'The Great Masturbator', 1929 by Salvador Dalí)*, by Glenn Brown. 1993. Oil on canvas, 215 by 322 cm. (© Glenn Brown; Courtesy Gagosian; exh. Gagosian, Grosvenor Hill, London).

These works refer to ideas on a more visual than theoretical level,

and the hauntological ideas behind the exhibition are not always apparent, however that is not necessarily always a problem. There is huge variety between the artists, and the exhibition curation offers some unexpectedly strange juxtapositions, similar to those that so excited the Surrealists: Rachel Whiteread's stern, stark *Untitled (Black Bed)* **FIG.4** sits amidst a Jeff Wall lightbox and paintings by Shaw and Jenny Saville. If the ghostly political ruptures from 1991 to 2017 feature only fleetingly, with left-wing melancholia of the kind Fisher explored mostly absent, the artistic ones of the modernist period come to the fore. The lack of conceptual or moving-image work here, and the primacy of painting and sculpture, is fascinating, considering how exhausted those forms seemed by the late twentieth century, even unfashionable in the 2000s. Perhaps the most interesting questions, then, are raised by *Notes on Sculpture* **FIG.5** by Tatiana Trouvé (b.1986), a patinated bronze work that resembles a chair, placed here staring out of the window. In her 'notes', what is Trouvé observing about where the form is now? Can it provoke sociological questions, or play a role in political movements? And what does – or should – haunt artists and audiences, anyway?



**Fig. 4** *Untitled (Black Bed)*, by Rachel Whiteread. 1991. Fiberglass and rubber, 30 by 123 by 192 cm. (© Rachel Whiteread; exh. Gagosian, Grosvenor Hill, London).





**Fig. 5** *Notes on Sculpture*, by Tatiana Trouvé. 2022. Patinated bronze, 139.4 by 43 by 24 cm. (© Tatiana Trouvé; courtesy Gagosian; photograph Lucy Dawkins; exh. Gagosian, Grosvenor Hill, London).

**Exhibition details**

**Haunted Realism**

Gagosian, Grosvenor Hill, London  
9th June–26th August 2022



## Footnotes

- 1** M. Fisher: 'What is hauntology?', *Film Quarterly* 66, no.1 (2012), pp.16–24, at p.16.
- 2** *Ibid.*
- 3** *Ibid.*
- 4** F. Engels and K. Marx: *The Communist Manifesto* [1848], available at [www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm), accessed 12th July 2022.
- 5** F. Jameson: 'Future city', *New Left Review* 21 (May–June 2003), pp.65–79, at p.73.
- 6** M. Fisher: *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Alresford 2009, pp.80–81.
- 7** See N. Cohen: 'What would it take for Labour's moderates to revolt?', *The Guardian* (9<sup>th</sup> December 2017), available at [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/09/what-would-it-take-for-labour-moderates-to-revolt](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/09/what-would-it-take-for-labour-moderates-to-revolt), accessed 14th July 2022; and M. Fisher: 'Neither Washington nor Tehran...', k-punk.org (17th March 2006), available at [k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007544.html](http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007544.html), accessed 14th July 2022.
- 8** An exhibition catalogue is forthcoming, which will include an essay by Michael Newman.
- 9** See 'Barbican stands by Stockhausen', *BBC News* (21st September 2001), available at [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1556137.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1556137.stm), accessed 14th July 2022.

THE  
**BURLINGTON**  
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

**The Burlington Magazine**  
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ