Hauntology: Ghosts of Futures Past [Book Review]

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Review: *Hauntology: Ghosts of Futures Past*

by Merlin Coverley

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Duly acknowledging the significant contributions of Mark Fisher (2012, 2014) and Jacques Derrida's (1994) contributions to the subject, Merlin Coverley here creates his own distinct work, presenting a wide-ranging survey of all things hauntological. The book is divided into three thematic strands connected with hauntology: 'Hauntings'; 'Experiments with Time' and 'Ghosts of Futures Past'. Each of these parts contains a number of specific cultural case studies, and, taking as a given that 'hauntology is in many ways a peculiarly British phenomenon' (Coverley, 2020, p. 234), Coverley's subject matter largely reflects this. Some topics covered will be familiar to students of all things wyrd and hauntological, including the work of MR James, Nigel Kneale, Alan Garner, Mark Fisher's writing and 1970s folk horror. Coverley muses throughout on the particular draw of the 1970s for hauntology as 'an era that hauntology appears to hold in preference to all others' (p. 14). What is also excellent to see, however, are several areas less familiarly covered, particularly some female writers and artists who are given prominence including the works of Vernon Lee, Susan Cooper and Laura Grace Ford. Despite its separate, distinct parts, the book deftly weaves examples together, providing a larger overall tapestry that less retreads what hauntology *is*, but more provides a historical overview of *that which is hauntological*.

In part one, 'Hauntings', Coverely pinpoints 1848 as year zero for hauntology, when Marx first published his *Communist Manifesto* during a period of uprisings and unrest across Europe. 'The ghost of communism' (Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, quoted in Coverley, 2020,

p.23) haunting Europe is contextualised within a period of Victorian obsession with the supernatural, ghost stories and the beginnings of the Spiritualist movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Into this milieu, Coverely introduces his first case study subject of Charles Dickens as a 'haunted man', both personally and professionally. It is interesting to review the familiar work of Dickens through the lens of hauntology which reveals his writing as exploring themes of re-lived moments, loss and 'a mourning for failed potentialities, alongside a recognition of the spectral nature of memory itself' (pp.36-7). *Hauntology*, therefore, traces a supernatural path beginning with these Dickensian hauntings in which ghosts of the past, present and future exist simultaneously. It should be of little surprise that ghosts and hauntology can be so literally intertwined but the term itself is so often 'stubbornly obscure…maddeningly opaque' (p.8), that to see it couched in discussion of literal representations of ghosts on stage and in literature nonetheless seems refreshing.

From this period of 19th century unrest and high infant mortality, Coverley expounds upon the representation of temporal disjuncture in popular culture and begins a journey of cyclic time through discussion of reflected images, things half-seen and half-remembered in film, television and literature. Moving through discussion of Darwin with debates of regression versus evolution, and Freud's notion of the uncanny, Coverley brings the reader toward the concern of part two, 'Experiments with Time', where he shows how the ghostly invades not only 'every aspect of our lives, from the political and the technological to the cultural and the literary' but also that it has always been so: 'to *be* is to be haunted' (p.8, italics mine).

Using the work of Alan Garner, JG Ballard and TC Lethbridge amongst others, Coverley examines themes of recorded time, repetitions and notions of the future as broken time. Coverely incorporates discussion of Alfred Watkins, ley lines and *The Old Straight Track* (1925), alongside Lethbridge's theories about hauntings and Nigel Kneale's *The Stone Tape* (1972). There are some fascinating parallels drawn and an appraisal of JW Dunne's more obscure and 'unwieldy' theories about 'Serial Time' which presents ideas 'challenging our perception of

history as linear and sequential' and which manifest in 'literature, music and film…establishing a tradition of their own' (p.129).

Despite discussion of a wealth of material incorporating belief, tradition and ritual alongside myth and legend (as well as numerous sources of folk horror), the only disappointment from the perspective of Contemporary Legend studies is that folklore itself is not foregrounded at any point in Coverely's book. The philosophical and psychological perspective Coverley takes remains appropriately at the fore but, given the folkloric content he incorporates, it seems a missed opportunity not to highlight folklore itself at some stage, and the unofficial, unrecorded histories that are implicit in the notion of history haunting the past. Coverely does discuss myth in a broad variety of contexts, noting that it 'retains its power through repetition' (p.147) but, rather than as mere perpetuation of a mythic cycle, it would have been useful to use an understanding of folklore as an extension of this in terms of its best defining characteristics: folklore's ability to adapt, evolve and reinvent.

This perspective might have allowed for broader discussion (and perhaps a less doomladen outlook) leading into the final part of the book, 'Ghost of Futures Past', which encapsulates nostalgia and retromania as regressive and deteriorative in a static present. Nevertheless, Coverley justly draws on Mark Fisher's seminal considerations of hauntology, the weird and the eerie to give a framework to the contemporary concept of hauntology. Problematising nostalgia as a form of regression is food for thought, suggesting a paradoxical state of looking backward to time periods such as the 1950s and '60s which themselves looked forward to the future and outward to the stars.The failure of western capitalist idealism, and 'seemingly perpetual crisis of late-capitalism' (p. 267), to deliver on its promises is outlined as a significant factor in hauntology, creating its central notion of lost futures, politically, socially and culturally. Hauntology is posited as an eerie effect resulting from the stifling of cultural progression; a lack of ability to look forward fuelling the deterioration of social imagination and a

society unable to escape the shadow of Thatcher's Britain or exhibit true freedom of thought, constrained by nostalgic tendencies.

The sense that British culture has become overwhelmed by nostalgia suggests that hauntology 'may be regarded as post-nostalgic' and, Coverley suggests, it describes a 'world in which the present can no longer be experienced as anything other than a sum of its pasts' (p. 13). This perception of widespread temporal disjuncture, or 'dyschronia', is, perhaps, the most important facet of hauntology, looking both back and forward at what society both promised and failed to deliver: 'while everyday life has sped up, culture has slowed down' (p. 238). Coverley's conclusions bring us back round in his hauntological cycle when, observing Britain's contemporary political, social and economic crises, he remarks: 'Today, it seems unclear whether we have returned to the 1970s or if the spectres of that decade have returned to us' (p. 286). Coverley clarifies that, as Mark Fisher outlined, hauntology is not just a general sense of 'spookiness' or vague abstraction, but is a 'technological uncanny' (p.12) as exemplified by the convergence of time, space, cultural anachronism and millennial technology. This echoes, for example, the nostalgic longing, homesickness and 'retromania' (p.232) represented in and by *Stranger Things* (2016-present): a contemporary series on streaming media set in the 1980s. The series not only draws from a wide range of cultural references from film, television, fashion and design aesthetics but is also recently responsible for re-popularising both music from that period and the vintage technology used to play them, such as personal cassette players. (At the time of writing, Kate Bush's song, 'Running up that Hill', from 1985 is at the top of the Spotify charts, and original cassette tapes of her *Hounds of Love* album from that era, containing the song, are listed on eBay for up to £185).

It remains debatable whether these types of nostalgic representation are imaginatively stilted and wallowing, or are in fact creating something new from the sum of their parts; perhaps this will be for younger generations to determine in retrospect of their own past. Nevertheless,

Coverley's discussion of hauntology as a concept is thorough, both chronologically and thematically, whilst retaining a sense of mystique and poetic reverence for its ethereal nature.

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