Haunted Spaces and Unsettling Predicaments: An Interrogation of (Capitalist) Sport via the Work of Mark Fisher

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Abstract

In utilising the work of Mark Fisher, this article critically interrogates contemporary manifestations of capitalist sport. Specifically, it examines how the notion of capitalist realism, as well as the related concepts of hauntology and the weird and the eerie, might serve to resist anthropocentricism and challenge political impotence in the face of multiple existential crises. Emphasising Fisher's focus on temporality and temporal aberration, the article explores how certain aspects of sports culture, such as the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, mountain bike trail building, GPS tracking and landscape photography—experiences that are both fascinating and terrifying in equal measure—might unsettle us in ways that provoke a reconfiguration of existing socio-political frames of reference. In doing so, the paper urges scholars and practitioners of sport to accept that things are never what they seem (or feel), and to embrace the ghosts of our, as-yet, unrealised (sporting) futures.

Keywords: Mark Fisher; capitalist realism; hauntology; weird; eerie; temporality; nature

A now prominent theorist in the study of society and culture, Mark Fisher's work has become a cornerstone of contemporary cultural theory. Across several significant publications that help uncover the pervasive influence of individual competition and private interest monopolizing our relations to education, art, fashion, film, television, music, and architecture, Fisher takes apart the mundanity of our current economic and political systems that routinely constrict the imagination to envision, debate, or even

construct alternatives to capitalism. His 'talents as a Stalker' (Colquhoun, 2021: 32)—prowling cultural objects via commentaries that pay homage to critical theory's better-known names (Karl Marx, Frederic Jameson, Slavoj Zizek, Jacques Derrida, Herbert Marcuse, Franco Berardi, to name a few)—lay bare his growing impact on the humanities and cultural studies. Profusive online contributor—evident in his *k-punk* blog posts (later published as *K-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher* [2018])—and dedicated educator, Fisher's ideas reveal a resonance that far surpasses the immediate uses of his own applications. Theoretically, his ideas follow an experimental imperative that encourages us to push beyond the stale, while not losing sight of what remains so perniciously common. Here, thinking the new does not fall foul of what is typically associated as a capitalist accumulation for new markets and demographics, but, instead, remains conscious of identifying those very patterns and behaviours – including those that are immoral, abusive, or polluting – that structure how we understand both the world and our everyday lives. Examining the strange and suddenly unfamiliar is never something that should be refrained from; rather, what remains strange, deeply unsettling, or provokingly misunderstood is always located in the familiarity of our reality itself.

This sense that things are never what they seem, that there are desires that evade simple identification, and thus should remain open to critique and interrogation, remains, for the authors of this article at least, a key attribute of Fisher's theorising (and legacy), and a salient tool in examining contemporary manifestations of sport. For some time, scholars of sport have engaged with socio-cultural, postmodern, and 'new materialist' theories in their quest to envision and articulate what could be termed post-capitalist forms of sport (Newman et al., 2020; Rail, 1998). Yet, despite some obvious intersections, and even a brief personal skirmish into the relationship between capitalism and 'football' (i.e soccer) (see Fisher, 2018), Fisher's work has yet to find critical purchase in socio-cultural analyses of sport. This is somewhat surprising, as the self-replication and stagnation of culture that Fisher identifies as the hallmark of contemporary capitalism have been widely critiqued within such analyses. Thus, where Fisher's work proves potentially elucidating in theorisations of sport is in its capacity to question the inevitability of our present and all its predicaments whilst exploring a range of alternative futures.

It is our contention, therefore, that where Fisher's theoretical importance lies is in thinking through, and, thus, beyond, what has become staid in cultural discussions of sport. Littered with the usual suspects (Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Karl Marx, Norbert Elias), we argue that critical analyses of sport's cultural and political significance belie any cross-disciplinary framework for the new to be conceived, especially across the myriads of topics and themes that sport both effects and infiltrates. Where this theoretical outlook is required is in affording a better appreciation of those troubling encounters that can be evoked in our sporting investments, whereupon Fisher offers a unique interdisciplinary approach to identifying the tensions, ambivalences, and contradictions that underwrite contemporary sports cultures. In this regard, Fisher's work fundamentally challenges the way we understand sport by inviting us to confront the often-strange forces that both shape and maintain it. In fact, whereas sport is frequently framed in simplistic terms – as a field of pure competition, where individual or team victory is the primary focus – Fisher's work encourages us to critically upend these surface-level narratives in order to consider those moments where the order of sport breaks down and where we are compelled to think about what is missing, occluded, or disavowed.

Indeed, if analyses of power, ideology, identity, and inequality continue to manifest in and through sport, then, as the following discussion will argue, Fisher's work can help to expand the critical and cultural study of sport. Such expansion points towards re-imagining how our sporting competitions are collectively organized, how amateur and professional athletes are framed and positioned, and how fans and spectators engage with sport in such a manner that the inevitability of sport as a product of capitalism can instead function to encourage us to think creatively about how sport might look in a post-capitalist world—one where the focus shifts from profit to the community of sporting participants. Importantly, Fisher's work is not just about critiquing sport as it exists but about imagining how it might be reshaped, restructured, and re-envisioned. In doing so, his ideas can push the boundaries of sports studies, offering a new framework for understanding the power dynamics, cultural tensions, and strange possibilities that define contemporary sport. Therein, new avenues for understanding how sport functions as both a site of capitalist control, and a potential cultural space for resistance and alternative futures, can be made.

With this mind, we seek to highlight three key ideas from Fisher's work that can afford a compelling insight into framing and re-thinking our relations to sport. The following discussion serves to introduce three key texts, and their associated concepts: 'capitalist realism', from *Capitalist Realism: Is There no Alternative?* (2009); 'hauntology', from *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (2022); and the 'weird' and the 'eerie', from *The Weird and The Eerie* (2016). By supplementing these introductions with unique examples, we take aim at the sedimented trends of contemporary thinking on sport to offer new experiences and evaluations. First, we reveal how sports remains indebted to a logic of capitalist realism that routinely relativizes the new as mere 'business as usual'; second, we consider how the presence of 'ghostly' objects—such as pollution, golf courses, and mountain bikes—come to shape our relations to sport and exercise; and, third, we perceive how it is set against these very predicaments that an awareness of the weird and eerie might disrupt and subvert the 'taken-for-grantedness' of sporting experience. Importantly, it is through such unsettlement that we propose to invigorate critical thinking on sport to progress a positive reimagining of how our sporting spaces, environments, practices, and pursuits should (and could) be inhabited. It is towards the first of these concepts that our discussion now turns.

Capitalist Realism

Fisher is perhaps best known for his elucidation of what he called capitalist realism: 'the widespread sense', he wrote, 'that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it' (Fisher, 2009: 2, italics added). He expounded on this idea in his aptly titled seminal text *Capitalist Realism: Is There no Alternative?* (Fisher, 2009) and other writings on cultural life under neoliberal capitalism (Fisher, 2018, 2022). Fisher (2009: 7) articulated capitalist realism in part through his observation of 'a deeper, far more pervasive, sense of exhaustion, of cultural and political sterility' within post-Fordist, neoliberal British society. There was, he argued, a 'pervasive atmosphere' in the early-twentieth-century British context of privatization, the loss of public space, and the dismantling of social welfare programs in the name of austerity, 'conditioning not only the production of cultural but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action' (Fisher, 2009: 16). In

arguing this, Fisher was not trumpeting the triumph of capitalist realism but trying to diagnose its workings in order to denaturalize its depressing air of permanence. Despite premature declarations of the end of the neoliberal order amidst extent state intervention during the COVID-19 pandemic, the persistence of privatization policies and the ongoing financialization of social reproduction underscores what scholars term the 'shapeshifting nature' of neoliberalism and, thus, the continued relevance of Fisher's capitalist realism (Bayliss et al., 2024: 542).

One of Fisher's objectives was to aid the construction of a new collective subjectivity attuned to postcapitalist desires and the particular tensions within twenty-first-century life (Colquhoun, 2021). For Fisher, the pervasive atmosphere of capitalist realism seemed to exhibit a 'pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture', facilitating its ability to commodify and extract capital from anti-capitalist expression (Fisher, 2009: 9). To counter the prefiguring of capital, he argued that 'there is no desire for capitalism as such,' and if we can recognize that the 'libidinal materials' of human life 'have no essential relation to capital' and that our collective desires are 'manipulated by capital's army of PR branding and advertising specialists,' we can point our energies towards constructing new postcapitalist subjectivities (Fisher, 2018: 520). In this sense, Fisher's capitalist realism was a future-oriented project of mapping potential exits out of capitalism's atmosphere of cultural sterility. 'If capitalist realism is so seamless, and if current forms of resistance are so hopeless and impotent,' he wrote, 'where can an effective challenge come from?' (Fisher, 2009: 16).

There is an important affective dimension to Fisher's articulation of capitalist realism, evident in his focus on the psychological and embodied politics of living with stress, anxiety, depression, and feelings of hopelessness during a time of multiple existential crises and capitalism's undisturbed dominance (Fisher, 2022). For Fisher (2009), capitalist realism derives much of its power to constrict and debilitate postcapitalist imaginaries via the pathologization and privatization of, among other things, stress and mental health. By perpetuating mental health maladies as individualized problems divorced from their structural, economic, and political conditions, capitalist realism engenders a politically neutered, depressing, yet seemingly realistic sensibility that there are no viable alternatives beyond cynically participating and consuming one's

fantasies of anti-capitalist resistance. What is profoundly depressing and anxious about the seemingly debilitating atmosphere of capitalist realism is what he termed its 'reflexive impotence': despite knowing and feeling that 'things are bad' people also come to believe that 'they can't do anything about it' (Fisher, 2009: 21). The task of building a collective subjectivity and consciousness in response to capitalist realism, thus, requires building new, collective modes of desire, feeling, and pleasure that are pulled away from market and consumer exchange.

COVID-19 and the 'Reiteration and Re-permutation' of Neoliberal Sport

Fisher's capitalist realism is a useful lens for understanding the re-entrenchment of neoliberal sport during the COVID-19 pandemic. Scholars such as Ang (2021) noted at the time how the pandemic dramatically exposed the multivariate, overlapping crises, tensions, and contradictions within the neoliberal capitalist order, underscoring the need for renewed and collective visioning of a postcapitalist, more humane and ecologically balanced order. Such contemplation of a post-neoliberal world briefly sprouted in relation to sport and corporatized, commercial sports media outlets and networks, which often present and frame sport so as to reproduce its current, dominant neoliberal iteration (Andrews and Silk, 2012). As the globalized industry and its live sporting events were acutely disrupted by the pandemic, there was, if only fleetingly, a sprinkling of discussion on popular media outlets on the possibility that the pandemic would lead to, if not a dramatic transformation, at least a questioning of the viability of contemporary sports. The sportswriter Will Leitch, in a column in *The New York Times*, opined that 'it remains an open question whether the world of sports will be able to fully recover. I suspect that it will never be quite the same' (Leitch, 2020). *The Los Angeles Times* noted that ESPN was scrambling to figure out how to deal with their programming with the sudden absence of live sporting events: 'The "S" in ESPN stands for sports. So what happens to one of the most-watched cable networks when its programming staple—live contests—shuts down?' (Battaglio and James, 2020).

Rather than ushering in a transformative reckoning with neoliberal sport, the industry exemplified capitalist realism's adeptness in re-calibrating capital accumulation to the new pandemic-shaped circumstances. The brief public questioning of the sport industry's viability dissipated as media outlets covered the industry's adaptation to

pandemic conditions with a neoliberal framing that re-entrenched sport's accumulation, consumption, and anthropocentric logics. A litany of popular media and cable news narratives were circulated that assumed and valorised the continued dominance of the capitalist model: stories of sporting events vowing to 'fight on' (Beacham, 2020); professional organizations strategizing how to continue their pre-pandemic activities while adapting to the new conditions and protecting teams and players from infection (Young, 2020); attempts by leagues and teams to replicate the experience of spectators at live sporting events through artificial crowd noise and life-size dolls (Associated Press, 2020); and, the lucrative economic opportunities in the burgeoning esports market (Wharton, 2020). Some academics and sport researchers contributed to this capitalist realist discourse by underscoring pre-pandemic sport's assured triumph over COVID-19 (Gardner, 2020). Though organizations would surely need to adapt their practices to changing conditions, sport, to quote a *Los Angeles Times* columnist, would 'survive the coronavirus pandemic and go on as before, perhaps with even more celebration and resilience' (Olmsted, 2020). Such discourses served to perpetuate a kind of sporting realism in which contemporary neoliberal sport as seen as permanent, necessary, and resilient regardless of changing circumstances.

By viewing sporting contexts through the lens of capitalist realism, Fisher's work can help researchers wrestle with difficult questions concerning the nature of desire amidst unrestrained commodification and the difficulties in imagining postcapitalist agency. Keeping in mind Fisher's (2009: 30) ultimate objective of articulating a new kind of collective political agent that is resistant to capital's 're-iteration and re-permutation' impulses, capitalist realism reminds researchers that constructions of postcapitalist relations need to be calibrated to the 'forms of discontent specific to post-Fordism' and, thus, post-Fordist sport. Rather than remain wedded to outmoded signifiers and understandings of desire, the task becomes recognizing that '[a]t the moment, our desire is nameless—but it is real' and it is 'for us to construct this future, even as – at another level—it is already constructing us' (Fisher, 2018: 520).

The Weird, or the Familiarly Strange

The weird can be characterised as a phenomenon that both disrupts and subverts the ordinary, challenging established norms while also opening into the surreal and

supernatural. Drawing on examples from literature and cinema, Fisher discusses how the weird engages with cosmic horrors, strange entities, and narratives that defy conventional reality. In so doing, the weird offers a departure from the familiar, inviting us to confront and consider the limits of our understanding.

This can be approached through the inherent 'wrongness' that the weird encapsulates. Yet, as Fisher (2016: 13, italics removed) suggests, such 'wrongness' does not serve as an all encompassing point of negativity, but can also allude to the 'presence of the new'. Indeed, becoming aware of something that does not necessarily belong, presents 'a signal that the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete' (Fisher, 2016: 13).[1] In effect, it is 'the irruption into *this* world of something from outside which is the marker of the weird' (Fisher, 2016: 20, italics in original).

On this basis, we can conceive of the weird as characterised by an opening between what is considered as normal and some other, alternative dimension (Bayman, 2019). There is, it seems, a disruption of the natural order in examples of the weird; a disruption that can evoke a feeling of unease or discomfort. In such cases, the weird does not necessarily imply horror or terror but rather a sense of cognitive dissonance when faced with the abnormal—it is the weird that violates the norms of reality, creating a sense of the unfamiliar or alien. As a result, it often involves encounters with the unknown, the cosmic, or the supernatural—a '"real externality" that is crucial to the weird' (Fisher, 2016: 16). Connections can be made here between this sense of 'beyond' and the externality it prefigures. Importantly, what seems to underscore examples of the weird is not some rigid distinction between internal and external, inside and outside, here and the beyond, but the extent to which the *external* relates to, and indeed impacts on, what is considered or accepted to be *internal*.

Such boundaries between inside and outside are today characterised by the multitude of weird gadgets that have come to characterise sport, including fitness and GPS trackers, biometric sensors, virtual reality training, recovery devices, and various other forms of smart devices related to clothing, such as, helmets and eyewear (Black and Cherrington, 2022). Increasingly, these gadgets render a whole host of information relating to blood pressure, heart rate, and calories that sophistically measure our own internal physiology and alert us and message us of these facts. Ultimately, these

'inhuman' objects are characterised by the weird assertion that they increasingly render our human knowledge of ourselves to ourselves (Black and Cherrington, 2022 see also Zizek, 2015), and thus making what is usually perceived as separate and unacknowledged, immediately present.

What the weird presents therefore is a certain fascination insofar as 'the weird cannot only repel, it must also compel our attention' (Fisher, 2016: 17). It is this sense of fascination that encourages us to stick with the weird. As Fisher explains, if there was no fascination, then the weird would simply be horrible. On this basis, we make the claim that there is perhaps something 'weird' that characterises of our relationship with sport (Black and Reynoso, 2024a). Even for those who are not participating but instead spectating, sport can maintain a weird fascination that, if we think of the snapped leg in football or the crash in Formula One, is often grotesque. In the replays that follow— replays that can be viewed repeatedly online—we witness a weird, grotesque fascination, and strange enjoyment (dare we say) that maintains our involvement and relation to the weird. Though no one would admit to wanting these events to occur, when they do, they are strangely alluring, and, as evident in the case of the safety car in Formula One, possibly frustrating. While, usually, these events remain outside the field of play or the usual course of events, they are nonetheless symptomatic of what is implicitly assumed and accepted, and perhaps, even relied upon: bestowing a certain enjoyment in sport via a grotesque that we very rarely acknowledge (Black and Reynoso, 2024b).

Accordingly, though the weird can be encountered in those sporting scenarios where the weird and grotesque posit a certain fascination, it is also in the juxtaposition of certain elements, like nature and culture, that reveals a weird incompatibility within sport (see below). Here, such an unsettling juxtaposition prompts a disquieting feeling, suggesting a discord where certain objects or entities should not coexist as they currently do. This dissonance becomes palpable when the cancellation of a major tennis tournament is announced due to poor air quality, or, when one is unable to engage in skiing due to the absence of snow on the mountain (Cherrington and Black, 2022). In either case, what is suddenly brought to light is the weird: the uncanny fact that such events do not sit outside the environments in which they occur. The discomfort this can cause is underscored when we witness lavish sporting events, like the Indian Grand Prix

or the Rio Olympics, in close proximity to poverty-stricken slums and favelas. Matters that might typically seem less significant on an ontological level, such as poverty, weather conditions, or CO2 emissions, are abruptly and often forcefully brought into sharp focus during these moments. These example, we argue, can help to pique our curiosity, inviting us to explore potential alternative realities and raising questions about our future.

The Eerie: An Enigmatic Alterity

In outlining Fisher's account of the eerie, we must distinguish what separates it from the weird. One way of achieving this is via Fisher's distinction between presence and absence. That is, while:

> the weird is constituted by a presence[.] … The eerie, by contrast, is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or is there is nothing present when there should be something (Fisher, 2016: 61, sic, italics in original).

The eerie, then, is concerned with the failures that characterise presence and absence: a feeling of a presence that should not be there or an absence that should be filled. As an example, we can think of Fisher's account of an 'eerie cry'—the failure of an absence that bequeaths a strange, unsettling presence. What remains eerie about the 'eerie cry' is that it encapsulates a cry that bears no agent, or, alternatively, when the sound itself proffers an odd presence of something more. To this extent, while 'The eerie concerns the unknown; when knowledge is achieved, the eerie disappears' (Fisher, 2016: 62), this does not suggest that all forms of non-understanding are inherently eerie. Instead, 'There must … be a sense of alterity, a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that lie *beyond* common experience' (Fisher, 2016: 62, italics added).

This is perhaps best reflected in Fisher's example of abandoned, dilapidated structures. Again, what characterises these sites is akin to a hysterical injunction that conveys no

immediate answer or understanding. 'Yet', as Fisher (2016: 62, italics in original) explains:

> the sense of the eerie is limited in these cases, because we are an offered an explanation of why these cities have been depopulated. Compare this with the case of the abandoned ship the *Marie Celeste*. Because the mystery of the ship—what happened to the crew? What made them leave? Where did they go?—has never been resolved, nor is ever likely to be, the case of the *Marie Celeste* is saturated in a sense of the eerie. The enigma here, evidently, turns on two questions—*what happened* and *why?*

In recent decades, we have witnessed this phenomenon through widely publicized and disconcerting images of deteriorating Olympic facilities in cities, such as Athens and Montreal, which are left abandoned after the conclusion of the games (Cherrington and Black, 2022). While once these venues served as sites of sporting spectacle, the now overgrown and deteriorating structures resemble something from post-apocalyptic science fiction (or, to use a television example, HBO's *The Last of Us* [2023-]). In such images, it is the absence of what should be presence—cheering crowds, competing athletes, the extravagance of the media entourage—that remains decidedly and eerily absent. Examples of eerie Olympic venues stand as stark reminders and points of debate regarding the deceitful narratives and ideologies that often surround the touted 'legacy' of the Olympic Games. Ultimately, these sites maintain a haunting significance, representing 'an atemporal failure of absence and presence' (Colquhoun, 2020: 79).

Accordingly, while, like the weird, the eerie represents an opportunity for us to free ourselves from what is both normal, standardized, and every day, Fisher points to the fact that examples of the eerie do not necessarily represent the 'shock' that comes to characterise the weird. Instead, 'The serenity that is often associated with the eerie—think of the phrase *eerie calm*—has to do with detachment from the urgencies of the everyday' (Fisher, 2016: 13, italics in original). This again bears a temporal significance that proves characteristic of the eerie. The importance here is to not fall foul of simply labelling this as an example of the often touted 'escape' that sport provides. To do so, proffers only a false dichotomy between sport and 'real life'; a distinction which the inherent politics of sport belies (Black and Reynoso, 2024a; Reynoso, 2021). Instead,
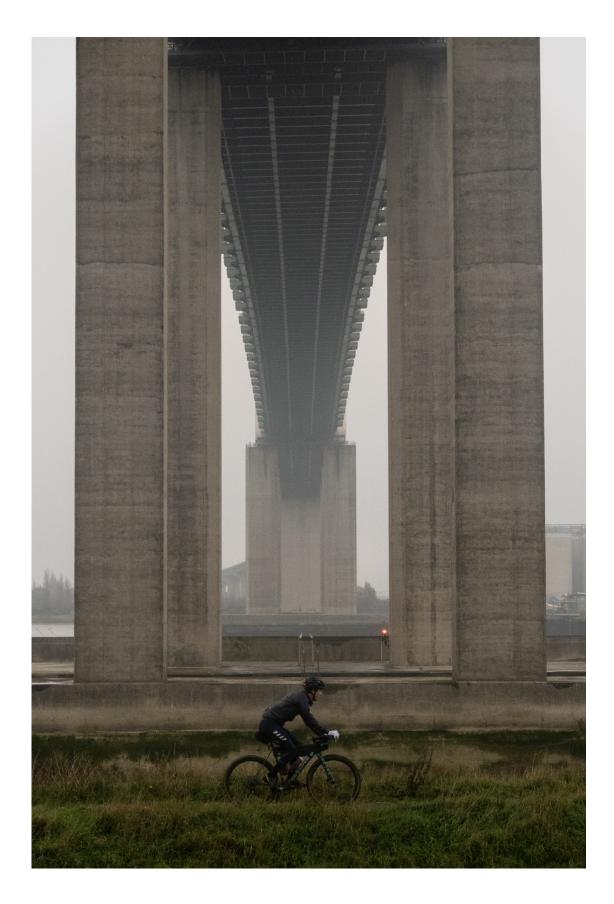
where instances of the eerie can be found in sport are in those moments just before a unique sporting occurrence. In what seems to be an unending amount of time in which the drop ball in rugby remains stationary in the air (as its glides towards goal), or in the undying moments where the striker pulls back their leg (before it hits the back of the net), there is suddenly, almost atemporally, an eerie calm amongst those watching; a freezing that remains temporally distinct from the celebration and exaltation that follows.

With regard to landscape, we can also consider how it is not simply the case that spaces and landscapes which bear no human presence are eerie, but that these spaces seem to be characterised by a human agency that cannot be so easily conferred—despite the fact that they are inherently human-made. The real crux at play is that when one is involved in such eerie environments, agency becomes encapsulated in the environment itself.

This can be seen in the photography of Alastair Johnstone, a photographer and picture editor, whose images intricately examine the relationship between people and landscape, and, more importantly, how people relate to and interact with landscape. In a series of photos on mountain biking, Johnstone considers how cycling can serve as a means of exploration, where the landscape, the destination, and the path taken are just as crucial as the act of riding itself.

What becomes apparent in these images is the dissolution between foreground and background. Insofar as these activities are usually conceived as taking place 'in' a particular environment or 'against' a particular landscape, in the image, the two are merged. In Johnstone's photography, greater importance is given to the overall context rather than minutely focusing on the 'action' (the ride itself). What we see is how the image dissolves the distinction between subject and landscape, thus portraying 'the landscape as an agent in its own right' (Fisher, 2016: 80). It is in accordance with this sense of agency, that a certain eeriness resides, one that is routinely reflected in mountain bikers' accounts of nature and their ridden environments (Black and Cherrington, 2020, 2021; Cherrington, 2022; Cherrington and Black, 2020).

What is unique here is not necessarily the fact that one simply prescribes nature or the landscape an agency, but that a sense of agency is eerily defined through an absence

that never seems very absent. Fisher (2016: 119) wrestles with these distinctions when he refers to 'indifferent nature' or 'mute nature'. Yet, as he notes, 'The term "indifferent" is perhaps ultimately inadequate, since it suggests an intentional capacity that is not being used. Mute nature, you could say, is not even indifferent: it lacks even the capacity for indifference' (Fisher, 2016: 119). While this may posit an enigma, waiting to be solved, we assert that what we are always left with is the very contradiction that such an eerie agency avail. The point here is not to resolve this contradiction, but, as Fisher (2016: 101) asserts, 'to keep faith with the questions that it poses'.

The Loss of 'Nature' (Sport) in Post-War Britain

Though Mark Fisher's writings on hauntology and depression are characterised by a lament for the loss of meaning and purpose in urban spaces (city centres) and cultures (pop, jungle, and rave music), they could just as easily have been written about the various rationalising, commodifying, and territorialising processes that have usurped people's experience of nature sport in post-war Britain. The intensification of enclosure, which began in the late medieval period and continued into the 19th century has led to the widespread privatisation and consolidation of common lands, forests, and other natural spaces, often at the expense of small-scale landholders and rural communities/land-users (Christophers, 2018). Rapid industrialisation and urban expansion, driven by economic growth and population movements, has meant that industrial activities—such as, mining, manufacturing, and intensive agriculture—are increasingly encroaching upon natural spaces, leading to pollution, habitat destruction, and the fragmentation of ecosystems (Monbiot, 2017). The growth of tourism and recreation industries in the 1960s and '70s has, at the same time, placed additional pressures on natural spaces, resulting in habitat degradation, soil erosion, and littering.

These trends are underscored by the lingering sense that despite the frenetic number of (leisure) activities dedicated to saving, reclaiming or re-engaging with 'nature', we appear incapable, psychologically or culturally, of developing sufficient ways of imagining the current situation as anything other than it is, turning to old solutions and outdated concepts to envisage a way out of the mess (Cherrington, 2022). This is arguably what Heidegger (1977: 52) means when he describes nature as 'bestand', a

uniquely modern phenomenon whereby nature becomes something to be ordered, controlled, and utilized for human purposes—essentially, a resource or stockpile. When nature is conceived of in this way, it is no longer seen in its intrinsic value or its own right, but rather only in terms of its usefulness or utility. For Heidegger, this transformation is a consequence of the technological mindset, which reduces everything to an object that can be manipulated or extracted for human gain.

One notable example of this is the introduction of National Parks in 1949 which, though partly intended to protect natural spaces, has, according to many, resulted in further enclosure, rationalisation, and ruination (Gissibl, 2012). Though this example, we can see how a National Park, and the leisure activities that take place there, is therefore always traced with culture as it is inscribed in 'nation'. Consequently, outdoor enthusiasts such as mountain bikers, climbers and horse riders continue to cram into already over-populated (and enclosed) green spaces, militantly protecting their own enclaves, whilst using comfortable but outdated vernacular relating to rights of way and nature preservation to justify their presence in these spaces.

In attempting to envisage a way out of this impasse, Fisher turns to Derrida's concept of 'différance', which refers to the way that everything exists because of its absence, and 'nothing enjoys a purely positive influence (Fisher, 2022: 17). In other words, every subject, every already existing thing (including nature), is always a chain 'of signs, the signification system, and discourses of humanities, all of which make the present absent' (Jin, 2021: 693). However, Fisher admits to finding Derrida frustratingly sceptical. He also claims that Derrida underplays the most important contribution of his work: that which relates to temporal disjuncture, suggesting that the 'traces' of deconstruction are never about a simple haunting—the past coming into the present—but rather they revolve around the very unsettling of temporal lines, the paradox of presence and non-presence, the disjointedness of time and memory; 'that which acts without (physically) existing' (Fisher, 2022: 18). In response, Fisher (2022: 252) seeks a more temporally variegated approach to spectrality that endeavours to find 'new ways to balance pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will'.

It is this temporarily variegated approach that we believe has purchase in explaining the complexities and contestations that are present in contemporary manifestations of

nature sport, whilst remaining cautious about the mischaracterisation of Derrida's work in Fisher's analysis. Indeed, to say that Derrida ignores temporal disjuncture, suggesting that the 'traces' of deconstruction are never about a simple haunting, is problematic, since for Derrida, deconstruction does quite the opposite, and is a central theme in much of his work (think: 'the time is out of joint'! (Derrida, 2006 [1994]: 44). The trace, but also logocentrism, hauntology, spacing, spectrality, cinder, Différance, and so on, are fundamentally an unsettling of temporal logic (and an inheritance from Heidegger), and have implications in terms of the way we think and experience nature. These criticisms notwithstanding, we continue to see value Fisher's analysis as it provides a lens through which we can extract the temporal variegation that Derrida proposes whilst emphasising the spectres of the future (i.e. in working through Jameson's depiction of postmodernity).

This follows and extends our previous efforts to analyse these phenomena, where we have defined Nature not as a static or fixed entity, but rather as a dynamic and ambiguous construct that emerges from the interdependent relationships between humans and non-humans. Via engagement with the works of Derrida, Morton and Zizek, we have posited, that nature has a 'spectral' existence, whereby the pleasures of being in and with nature arise from recognizing the strangeness and complexity of these interconnections (Cherrington and Black, 2020). This perspective challenges the traditional view of nature as a harmonious and balanced entity. Instead, it emphasizes nature's inherent instability and radical contingency, suggesting that our understanding of nature should move away from notions of balance towards an acceptance of its complexities and inconsistencies. Thus, in what follows, and via engagement with a range of 'nature sports', we use Fisher's work on hauntology to unpick the various manifestations of nature as a vibrant, living, and at times callous, entity that is continuously influenced, or haunted, by human actions and the materials encountered in the environment.

The 'Haunted' Spaces of Nature Sport

Following the conceptual legacy of Derrida, Fisher introduces us to the concept of hauntology, which extends work on difference in two, important ways. In moving away from an ontology of presence, the value of hauntology, writes Fisher (2022: 18), lies in

the 'agency of the virtual … that which acts without physically existing'. Here, we can differentiate between: a) that which '(in actuality is) *no longer*, but which remains effective as a virtuality (the traumatic 'compulsion to repeat')'; and b) that which '(in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual' (Fisher, 2022: 19). On this, Fisher emphasises the importance of Derrida's 'spectrality', suggesting that joyful encounters can be had with the 'Cultural absences it [hauntology] paradoxically makes present' (Fisher, 2022: xiv).

This is evident in mountain bike trail building, where builders frequently create and reject interpretations of past events (no longer, but still effective), whilst also recognising how their involvement can influence a more focused appreciation of the present (Black and Cherrington, 2021; Cherrington and Black, 2020). When trail builders unearth historical artifacts, such as, fossils, dinosaur bones, and the spoils from old coal pits, they experience disruptions that highlight the historical significance of the sites they work on. These artifacts are often referred to through the formal and bureaucratic vernacular of *Sites of Special Scientific Interest* (SSSIs) that add further layers of historical context to their work. This also explains the deliberate pun in 'hauntology' (haunted-ontology). For if, in the hauntological mode, a trail builder starts to dig out the land and encounters a temporally undulating object like a fossil, labelling it as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) appears to further entrench the presence of the past. Moreover, it enfolds the traces of the past into the present through a state mandated signifier, one that serves to enclose the space. With this in mind, trail builders can, to a greater or lesser extent, begin to understand these various hauntings, considering how their shaping of the environment will last over time (not yet happened but already effective).

Here, we can again see how the reflective impotence mentioned in earlier sections comes to haunt our ability to develop an effective political, beyond limited (and capitalist) notions of 'Nature' and 'growth' (Berardi, 2011). This, according to Fisher, is not just about the old (generations, cultures etc.) coming to terms with new; 'saying it was better in their day' (Fisher, 2022: 7), but rather, the complete inability to perceive 'a non-individual Future, the collectively shared and experienced anticipation that tomorrow will be different from today, in some noticeably improved way' (ibid).

Presently, this is particularly evident in the context of sport-related climate interventions, where Wilson and Millington (2020: 2) note that:

> despite knowing that the consequences of not taking environmental issues seriously enough could be cataclysmic, responses to sport-related environmental issues have still been shown in many cases to be surprisingly weak, hollow and half-hearted.

The collective apathy and inability to care highlighted here is further fuelled by the attention sapping tendencies of digital technology and consumerism (Stiegler, 2012). For example, many of us now accept the simulated authenticity of virtual nature walks and indoor climbing walls without stopping to think about why they are there in the first place (the disappearance and mass over-consumption of nature). Such (re)presentations of 'nature' are characterised by a seamless amalgam of historical conversance, cleansed of all complexity, but ultimately leaving the users of green space feeling hollow and unsatisfied. What is lost in these consumer experiences, according to Fisher (2022: 144), is 'the very possibility of loss' since we are now numb to the idea that 'Nature' (with a capital N) no longer exists. Thus, perhaps one of the most sinister aspects of contemporary sporting cultures is the manner in which it normalises catastrophe demanding that we indulge in every pleasure, whilst, at the same time, encouraging us to disavow the sense of unease that accompanies social, environmental, and political turmoil (Horvat, 2021).

Yet, like Tsing (2015), Fisher recognises that there is hope to be found in the melancholia that accompanies the loss of green space, since it reminds us that despite the seeming omnipresence of capital, there are instances where 'nature' acts back. Recent work on golf, for instance, reveals how loss of facilities, revenue, jobs, land, etc., due to climate change or social unrest can be transformational in several ways (Millington, 2024). The idea of the abandoned golf course is a good image of the eeriness of capital, as it shows how land has been devoured then defecated after extracting all its material gains. In *Hauntology*, Fisher is pointing towards a reclamation of what capital has devoured (community, collective spirit, hope), wherein both real estate and the public park could still be an unpleasant encounter with capitalist realism, because although the possibility of the commons is there, all that is left are isolated

housing estates and poorly designed and neatly trimmed public parks. Once again, potentiality is enfolded back into the status quo.

The point here is that the simulated authenticity of nature sports was already there in the thing that we thought was nature, as we have already enframed nature in our capitalist image. At heart, capitalist realism is operating through the very lens in which we view the world, not just the profit-ridden simulations we make of it. By studying the complex and contradictory ways in which these green spaces are inhabited and transformed by exercisers, sociologists of sport can gain insights into strategies for resilience, adaptation, and coexistence in a rapidly changing world, since 'environmental catastrophe provides what a political unconscious totally colonised by neoliberalism cannot: an image of life after capitalism' (Fisher, 2022: 228).

Problematising Liberal, Anti-Anthropocentric Solutions

Care is taken by Fisher to differentiate hauntology from other, liberal, approaches to (in this case) the loss of 'Nature' and the melancholia that follows. In these accounts, advocates, such as Shwass et al. (2021), call for a return to a harmonious balance with nature, with sport and physical activity being positioned as a panacea for the social, mental, and environmental ills that are inflicted by habitat disruption, pollution and climate change. In what is now a commonplace critique of such realist narratives within the social and cultural study of sport, the reification of idealised notions of 'green' or 'natural' has been problematised for implying a separation between human beings and the environment, perpetuating a dualistic understanding of the world that privileges anthropocentric outcomes and human-centric solutions (see Bustad et al., 2022; O' Connor et al., 2023). Equally problematic, though for different reasons, is the increasingly fashionable conceptual oeuvre of New Materialist scholars, who, in a rush to attribute agency to materials, such as, water, soil, and trees, charting new ways of (co)becoming human in the Anthropocene, have only rendered the historical legacy of human beings obsolete (Ware, 2024).

When seen through a Fisherian lens, one of the main problems with liberal anti-anthropocentrism as it applies to sporting natures 'is not so much that the human (unwittingly) emerges centre stage, but that it does so in exactly the wrong kind of way'

(Ware, 2024: 16). On this, Fisher returns to temporality, emphasising the gap in our subjectivity as a fundamental aspect of understanding the relationship between the virtual and the actual. This gap is positioned as crucial for rethinking spatial ontology dialectically and for exploring the complexities of certain historical interpretations of green spaces, as our encounters with these spaces are necessarily 'stained' (Fisher, 2022: 191) by our understanding of what was, what is, and, perhaps, most crucially, what could have been. In this sense, in the same way that urban sports like urbex (Bingham, 2023) may be radically arrhythmic, so too may forms of green exercise, such as, mountain biking, rock climbing, or ultramarathon running (Cherrington et al., 2020); disrupting the predictable rhythms of everyday movement, making it discordant and out of step with traditional (and thus historical) norms regarding how green spaces should, or shouldn't be, encountered. The key, for Fisher (2022: 24), and what, for us, should always be front and centre in scholarship on sporting natures, is 'a refusal to adjust to what current conditions call 'reality'—even if the cost of that refusal is that you feel outcast you're your own time'.

Accordingly, Bustad et al. (2022: 94) write that that a shift to more impulsive and less purposeful forms of (outdoor) leisure, such as those that were popular during the COVID-19 pandemic, provokes (albeit temporarily) 'philosophical and ethical consideration of outdoor recreation and leisure practices as anthropocentric and wedded to capitalist dictates of compulsive activity'. Concomitantly, the growth of 'microadventures' fundamentally changed our experience of time by shifting the focus from extended, remote adventures to shorter, local experiences (Mackenzie and Goodnow, 2020). By engaging in outdoor activities closer to home, individuals began to make more efficient use of their time without the need for extensive travel or elaborate planning. This allowed for more frequent and accessible moments of self-reflection, leading to a heightened sense of exploration and discovery in familiar surroundings. Overall, then, it is no coincidence that the 'anthropause' (Bustad et al., 2022), as a temporal anomaly, reshaped leisure experiences by encouraging outdoor exploration, connections to nature, and reflection on the significance of leisure activities during times of global uncertainty, demonstrating that there is hope to be found in wondering (in both a physical and cognitive sense) experimenting, getting lost, and engaging in fugitive time (Fisher, 2022: 137).

Conclusion

What we hope to have achieved over the preceding sections is not just an introduction to some of Fisher's key ideas and concepts, but also a new way of looking at sport. Accordingly, by way of summarising these key concepts, we note the following.

In capitalist realism, Fisher offers a conceptual lens for confronting capitalist reproduction through popular sport while also underscoring the challenges associated with forging collective anti-capitalist resistance. With organized sport's close ties with capitalism, whether through commercialization, marketization, mediatization, or the hyper-valorisation of competition through athletic achievement, capitalist realism can help researchers critically and generatively reflect on the possibility that contemporary neoliberal sport derives part of its power from its ability to commodify and capitalize on expressions, material and discursive, of anti-capitalist sentiment. In this sense, the possibility of envisaging and building alternatives to neoliberal sport depends on whether we can de-mystify our psychological and consumer-driven desires for neoliberal sport.

In his account of the weird and the eerie, Fisher provides the opportunity to envelope the strange in our analyses of the social, cultural, economic, and political significance of sport. Too often our relation to sport, and our fascination for sport, occur despite the obvious forms of inequality and discrimination that it enacts (Black et al., 2024). While we can remain critical of such aspects, we are nonetheless encountering a relatively strange environment in which one's critical sensibilities are easily hampered by the desire to compete or by the excitement that is found in the sporting contest. What both the weird and the eerie provide is an opportunity to engage with sport's strange attraction. This is not to suggest that all of sport's oddities are good, but that if we are to understand the significance of sport then identifying opportunities to theoretically parse its uniqueness remains an essential importance. Achieving this necessitates a recognition of the peculiar and unsettling occurrences that impact our daily lives. Embracing this uncertainty can help render us susceptible to others, subject us to transformation through alien and unpredictable encounters, and immerse us in dynamic relationships that reshape both the world and ourselves.

Finally, with regards to hauntology, we draw attention to how the concept can offer a new way of envisaging green exercise from beyond the trappings of rationalisation, commodification, enclosure, and pollution. It also provides a conceptual toolkit that might help sociological and philosophical interpreters to reimagine what it might mean for people to inhabit, experience, and reflect upon their use of green space after 'Nature'. Above all, hauntological thinking reminds us how temporality and temporal disjunction shape our cultural and subjective experiences (Fisher, 2022). Via these experiences, we are, often violently, exposed to the ghosts of our 'future-passed' (Colquhoun, 2022: xiv). Perhaps Fisher's greatest contribution to the critical study of green exercise, therefore, is that he encourages us to take the time to enjoy these encounters: for it is only through these joyful encounters with the negative that we can understand, and critically engage with our past failings, whilst experiencing the future anew.

In sum, Fisher's work challenges the study of sport to confront the unseen and the strange forces that shape it, compelling us to think beyond the obvious narratives of competition and victory. His ideas push us to critically examine how sport operates within the broader capitalist system, while also recognizing the potential for resistance and the imaginative possibilities that sport holds. Fisher's work doesn't just critique; it invites the study of sport to embrace new ways of seeing, thinking, and ultimately reshaping both the field and ourselves.

Notes

[1] Fisher elaborates upon this sense of the new with reference to Jacques Lacan's notion of *jouissance*.

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