

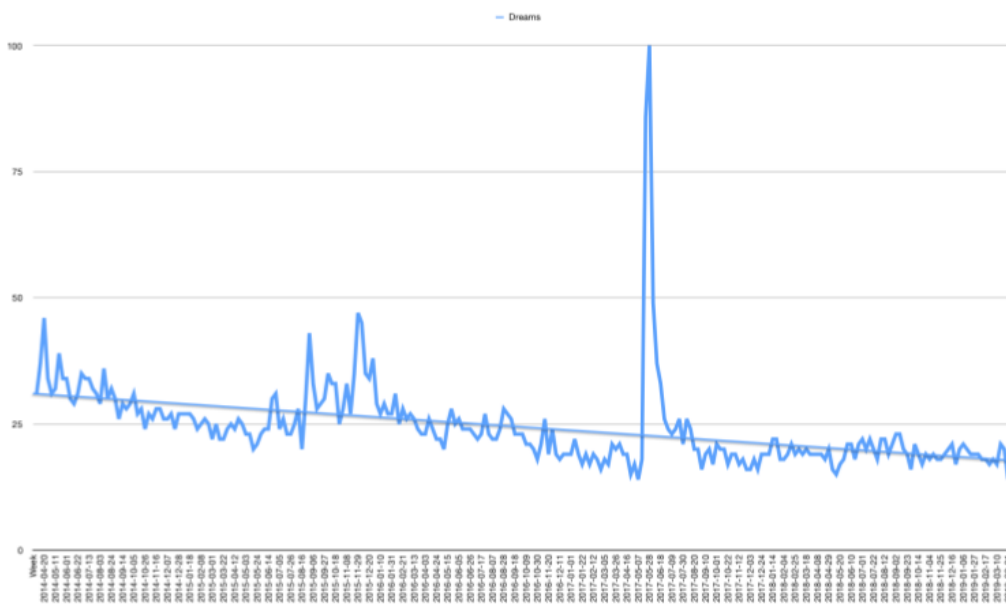
#GOALS – Tim Cowlshaw

16–21 minutes

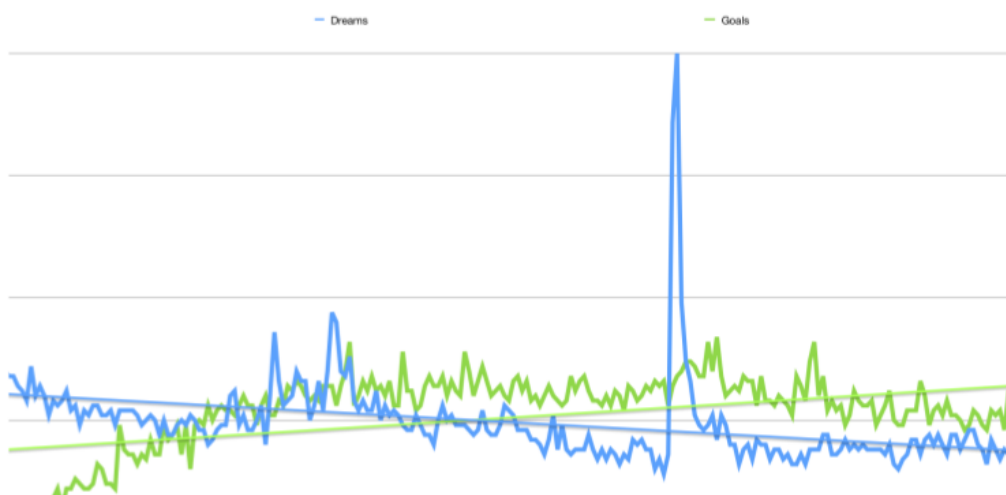
Measurement, control and capitalist realism in mediated leisure.

(This is a loosely-edited and tidied-up version of a talk I gave at [Theorizing the Web 2019](#), as part of the “Good Hustle” panel session examining how “emerging workplace technologies impose modes of tracking, evaluating, and measuring that cut against workers’ autonomy and bargaining power”).

The internet isn’t dreaming any more.



So, where have our dreams gone? What do we have instead?



Our dreams may be in decline, but they're being replaced by our **goals**.



We have relationship goals, friendship goals, makeup goals, home goals, wedding goals, fitness goals, family goals, travel goals, style goals and food goals.



Almost any possible aspect of our lives can now be characterised as a 'goal' to be achieved.

And this concerns me.

Why be worried by a fairly subtle linguistic trend? Why do 'goals' in particular trouble me?

To me, there's an important difference between a 'goal' and a 'dream'. Goals have two properties that bother me, and which make them a symptom of a larger social malaise, which I

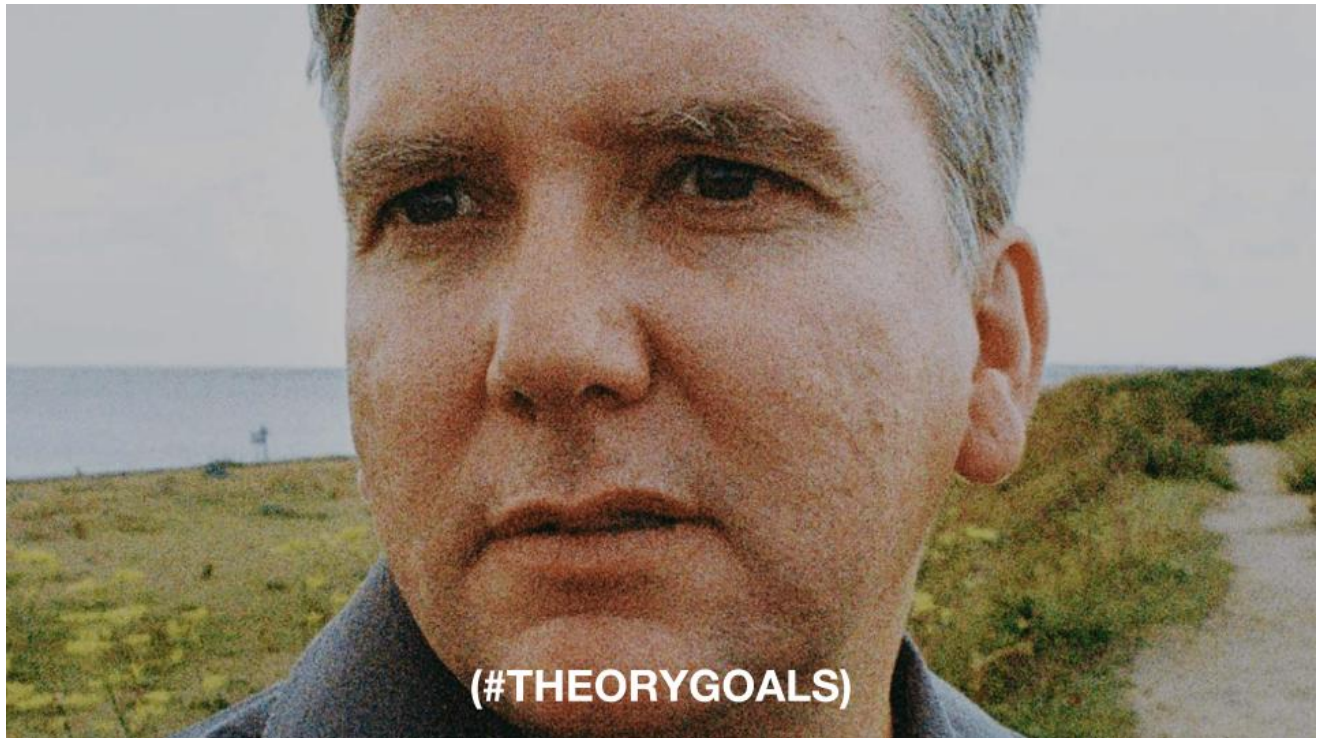
think it's worth examining today.

Firstly, goals imply a pragmatic outlook. They're achievable within the status quo.

Secondly – they imply something that's measurable – a goal has a known, unambiguous state of achievement.

Both these things might sound fairly benign. However, I think it's worth considering what's lost when our aspirations become more short term, and are limited to the measurable, and also where this 'metricisation' in how we view ourselves might have come from.

And to find answers to this, I think a very good place to start is the work of Mark Fisher.



Mark was a cultural theorist, political activist, blogger, writer and educator who died in 2017. He was among the first cultural theory writers who were 'extremely online' – his work was native to the internet, as that's where the majority of it was produced.

His blog, [k-punk](#), was started as a space to maintain a type of cultural discourse that Mark, saw as missing from academia. A discourse that presented high theory in accessible, everyday terms, making connections with popular culture, grass-roots activism and everyday life.

Mark published a great deal of work in the academic press, but many of his ideas were germinated through posts on k-punk, and the community of music, pop culture and politics blogs of which it was a part.

This is what makes Mark's work so interesting for me. It is *of* the internet without always being *about* the internet. Because Mark's work was predominantly expressed *through* the internet as a medium, the conditions of working online shaped his theories, but he didn't attempt to 'reify' the online as a concept in his work. I think this makes it especially relevant to understanding the cultural shifts that the encroachment of the big social media platforms into online space have entailed, as it helps us draw parallels with more general social, cultural and political shifts happening both online and off. It's these parallels that I'd like to examine, because, for me, the 'metricisation' of our online sociality is less about the encroachment of technology itself into our leisure time, as it is to do with the encroachment of a managerial capitalist ideology which

predates the internet as a technology. It's the ideology that Mark called **Capitalist Realism**.



Capitalist Realism is summed up in a quote, attributed to both Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek:

“It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism”

Fisher – Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? p2, 2009

For Mark, this observation was key to understanding many aspects of life under late capitalism:

*“Capitalist realism as I understand it cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a **pervasive atmosphere, conditioning** not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier **constraining** thought and action.”*

Fisher – Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? p16, 2009

There are three important aspects to this. First is that the exploitation of capital is as much affective as economic. It's an '**atmosphere**' that conditions how we think and feel. Second, it **constrains** our thought and action – it sets limits on what is perceived to be possible. And third, it's **pervasive** – it affects every aspect of our lives.

One key part of this is what he calls the '*Business Ontology*' – the axiom that

“it is simply obvious that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business”

Fisher – Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative? p17, 2009

The dominant form and narrative of 'business' in this case is post-Fordism – which for Mark was particularly significant. Rather than the Fordist or Taylorist model by which workers are surveilled and measured by a separate group of managers, under Capitalist Realism we are “required to be our own auditors”

“If the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism had its psychic casualties, then post-Fordism has

innovated whole new modes of stress. Instead of the elimination of bureaucratic red tape promised by neoliberal ideologues, the combination of new technology and managerialism has massively increased the administrative stress placed on workers, who are now required to be their own auditors.”

Fisher – [The Privatisation of Stress](#), in *Soundings Magazine*, 2011

As well as the way in which post-Fordist workers are *literally* complicit in their own control through self-measurement, Mark also identified the way in which the *language* of capitalism functions as a form of control – in particular, how the language of entrepreneurialism and competition has infected much of our lives, and how this serves to further the cause of Capitalist Realism, making any alternative to it seem even more remote:

“however much individuals or groups may have disdained or ironised the language of competition, entrepreneurialism and consumerism that has been installed in UK institutions since the 1980s, our widespread ritualistic compliance with this terminology has served to naturalise the dominance of capital and help to neutralise any opposition to it.”

Fisher – [The Privatisation of Stress](#), in *Soundings Magazine*, 2011



Finally, he identified that the dominance of Capitalist Realism entailed the breaking down of divisions between our working and not-working selves, and that we are increasingly required to ‘perform’ qualities such enthusiasm, creativity and self-expression in our working lives:

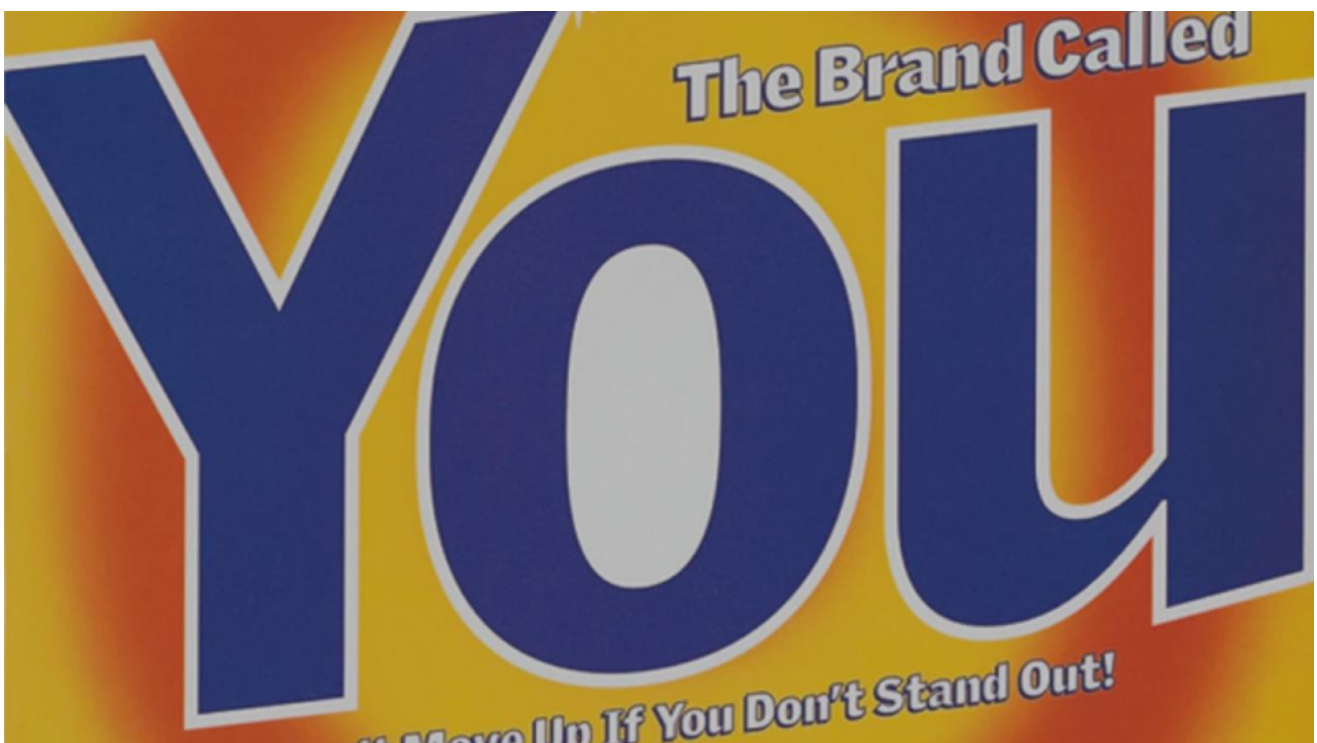




The management style in Office Space is a mixture of shirtsleeves-informality and quiet authoritarianism. Judge shows this same managerialism presides in the corporate coffee chains where the office workers go to relax. Here, staff are required to decorate their uniforms with 'seven pieces of flair', (i.e. badges or other personal tokens) to express their 'individuality and creativity'. [...] The flair example also points to another phenomenon: hidden expectations behind official standards. Joanna, a waitress at the coffee chain, wears exactly seven pieces of flair, but it is made clear to her that, even though seven is officially enough, it is actually inadequate – the manager asks if she wants to look the sort of person 'who only does the bare minimum'.

Fisher – Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative? – pp 39-40, 2009

Now, if I wanted to imagine a *manifesto* for Fisher's dystopian vision, I probably couldn't do better than '[The Brand Called You](#)' – the 1997 Fast Company article by Management consultant and motivational speaker Tom Peters, who has been [variously and hilariously described](#) as "The Red Bull of management thinkers", and "A human exclamation point who no longer needs his last name".



The Brand Called You is credited with coining the concept of the 'Personal Brand' and it's a terrifyingly sober articulation of everything Fisher would rail against 12 years later in *Capitalist Realism*.

The idea of a 'personal brand' is pervasive in today's world, and Peters links it explicitly to the idea of bringing post-Fordist strategies of measurement into one's personal life. He encourages the would-be brand to 'think, breathe, act, and work in projects' – due to the fact that the 'project' as an atomic unit of effort affords measurement.

“Almost all work today is organized into bite-sized packets called projects. A project-based world is ideal for growing your brand: projects exist around deliverables, they create measurables, and they leave you with braggables. [...] Today you have to think, breathe, act, and work in projects.

Project World makes it easier for you to assess — and advertise — the strength of brand You.”

Peters — [The Brand Called You](#), in *Fast Company* magazine, 1997

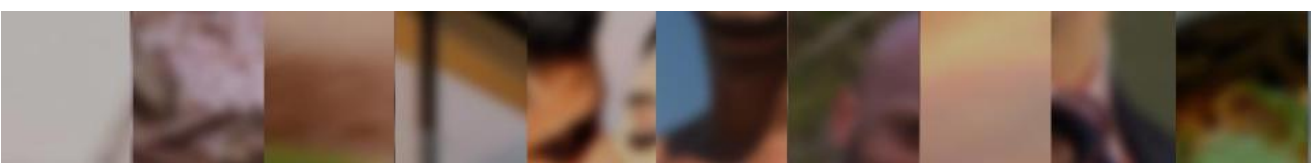
He also advocates for personal ‘mission statements’ and regular ‘personal focus groups’ to evaluate the progress of ‘brand You’.

While the 1997 version of this might seem far-fetched, these are precisely the mechanisms that are afforded and encouraged by modern social media platforms. Capital in 2019 relies less on focus groups and more on passively tracked KPIs and analytics than capital in 1997 — and the same technologies are not just *available* to us, but are *imposed* upon us as we go about our leisure activities on these platforms. Follower and like counts, trending topics — the platforms are **built** to afford measurement, comparison and competition and therefore the self-policing of our private selves in a way that is sanctioned by capital!



This can lead to a form of ‘virtual presenteeism’ in various lines of work — particularly those who are precariously employed. Barbering is an interesting example of this — ‘barbering instagram’ is a huge thing — not just a medium for showcasing one’s craft, but a culture, community and lifestyle which is all-encompassing.

But, this isn’t just about the way we present our work selves online — it’s about the way we present and see ourselves full stop. Hence my fascination with ‘#goals’. They’re measurable, and they’re pervasive. They employ both the language and (via the social media platforms) the affordances of post-Fordism to our personal lives, encouraging us to view the world in those terms.





#GOALS

This is a vicious circle – the ‘crisis of imagination’ which brought us the world of managerialist measurement compounds itself. We can no longer imagine a future outside of it! We no longer have dreams, only goals.

And what better way to illustrate this circle than in the cases where people’s dreams and aspirations have been subsumed into another opportunity for labour in the service of capital? As an example – Oliver Lee Bateman, writing in Mel Magazine earlier this year, [describes the life of Alex Jimenez](#), aka [@TheYachtGuy](#), king of Yachting Instagram with over 800 thousand followers.

“The watches are heavy on the wrist,” he said. “They’re great to look at, but their bands often cut into the wrist. And yeah, the room is small, but with my nocturnal schedule, it’s not like I sleep very much. I take maybe one picture a day and post a few Instagram stories, but I’m expected to be up on the deck, mingling with partygoers and selling the mystique of the yacht.”

“He now made a “comfortable middle-class living,” but sitting there with me in the cabin, fretted that it could go away at any time. “This is me working a little network I’ve built using someone else’s social media platform,” he said. “If Instagram changes its algorithm slightly, there goes a bit of my business. If Instagram disconnects some of the tools I use to build and monitor my account, there goes a bit of my business. And if Instagram goes away and is replaced by something newer and better, I need to get there first, just like I did with this account. If I don’t, I’m done. I’m totally dependent on a platform that’s completely out-of-control.”

Bateman – [The Lonely Life of a Yacht Influencer](#), in Mel Magazine, 2019.

Jimenez, a former short-haul truck driver and yacht enthusiast from the Bronx, saw Instagram and the burgeoning influencer industry as a means of parleying his love of yachts into a career – only to realise that the work of an ‘influencer’ is precarious and piecemeal – performing an illusion of affluence and leisure for his audience in order to eke out a living promoting yacht brokers.

So, we’ve seen how social media platforms encode the language and instrumentation of post-Fordist capital, and afford a way of seeing the world and presenting ourselves that brings its logic into our private lives. Is there any solution to this?

Some think that limiting our time on these platforms is the solution. [Joe Edelman](#) is a former engineer and self-styled philosopher, who [claims to have coined the term ‘Time Well Spent’](#).

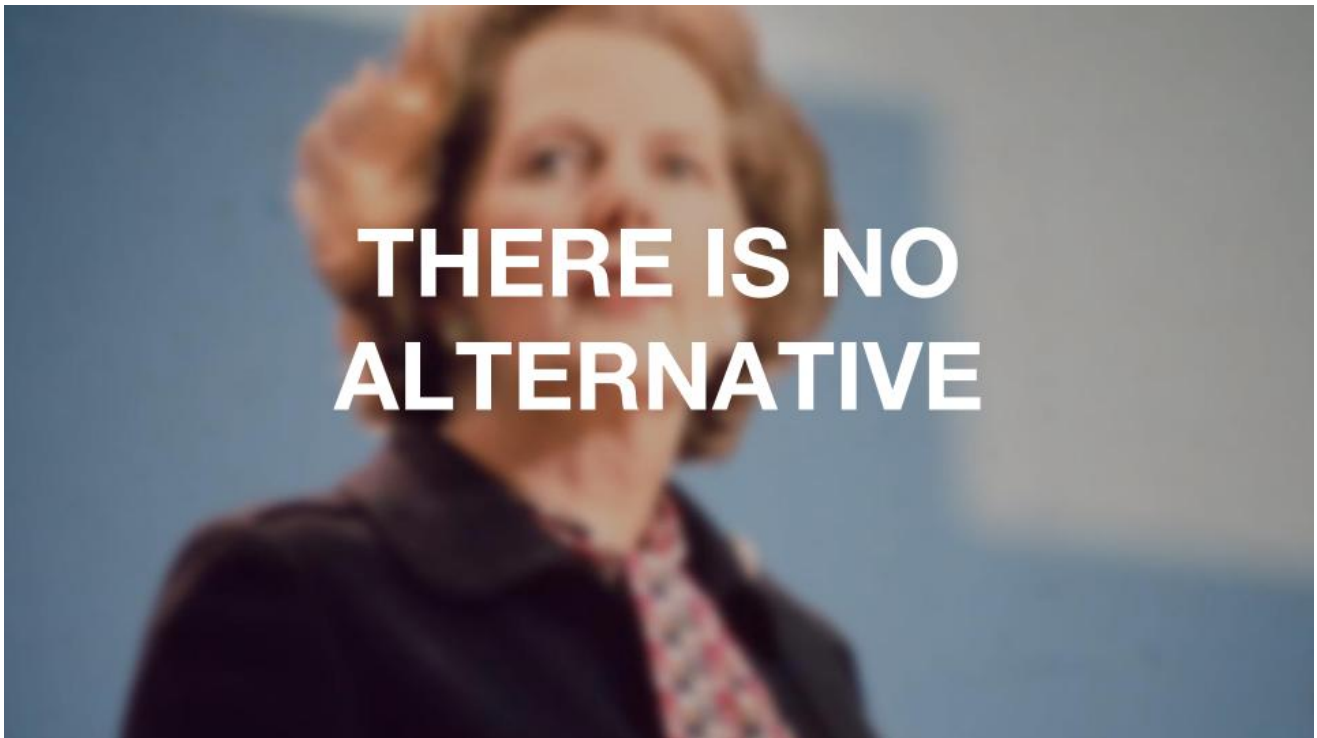
[Time Well Spent](#) is a movement which advocates for designers of networked technologies to build services with human values in mind, and which allow more ‘intentional’ interaction with these services.

Time Well Spent’s analysis of many of the problems of digital platforms is prescient – in particular the way the mechanisms of addictive gambling devices are co-opted by the designers of digital services to drive engagement.

However, in their strategies for resistance, they also appeal to the capitalist realist mechanisms of measurement and aspiration. In [his 2016 essay “Is anything worth maximising?”](#) Edelman advocates for what he calls “whole person analytics” and “reason-based metrics” – the ability for users to enumerate their aspirations or ‘reasons’ for action, and to measure the time spent on activities in service of these aspirations

This conception has little space for the surprising or the ludic, to be idle, or to dream. It also follows the post-Fordist practice of self-auditing, advocating that users police their own screen time in order to limit its harmful effects. In this way it fails to challenge the logic of measurement which is central to the capitalist realist position (and to the logic of platforms)

So, what can be done? If both the digital platforms *and* the strategies to resist their most harmful effects are steeped in the logic of capital, is this merely a vindication of Mark’s conception of capitalist realism – that no coherent alternative can be imagined – that, in the words of one of neo-liberalism’s most famous architects, **“THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE?”**



In the introduction to his unfinished work ‘Acid Communism’, Mark points to a glimmer of hope, arguing that the dominance of the capitalist realist position is, in fact, a specific response to the fact that the material conditions for total liberation from capital have never been better

“The closer the real possibility of liberating the individual from the constraints once justified by scarcity and immaturity, the greater the need for maintaining and streamlining these constraints lest the established order of domination dissolve. Civilisation has to protect itself against the spectre of a world which could be free” (Acid Communism – Unfinished Introduction)

Fisher – ‘Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)’ in K-Punk: The Collected and

For Mark – the very dominance of the capitalist realist ideology was a symptom of the waning power of capital over our lives, and a sign that alternative ways of being were becoming possible. These alternatives, according to Mark, were centred around “the collective capacity to produce, care and enjoy” –

“Instead of seeking to overcome capital, we should focus on what capital must always obstruct: the collective capacity to produce, care, and enjoy.”

Fisher – ‘Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)’ in K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher, 2018

– those aspects of life which ‘capital must always obstruct’. In focusing on both the ludic and the collective – Mark’s ideas mirror those of Jodi Dean, on whose work I will end.

In a talk called ‘[Selfie Communism](#)’, Dean defines the idea of ‘communicative capitalism’ – a capitalism which exploits communication in the same way as industrial capitalism exploits labour. She goes on to identify strategies for resistance which closely compliment Fisher’s ideas.

Following the Marxist edict that ‘capitalism produces its own gravediggers’, she identifies the ways in which communicative capitalism has produced new opportunities for collectivity, in the form of the creative, playful combination of images, speech and text as a communicative medium – with examples like Fandoms, reaction gifs, memes and selfies. For Dean, these uses of images subordinate the individual subject of the image to its power to be circulated by the collective – “The identity of a singular person flows into collective expression of common feelings”.



What’s interesting to me about this ‘secondary visuality’, as Dean terms it, is that it precisely resists the qualities of capitalist realism we discussed above. The way in which images derive their expressive power through circulation and assemblage resists capitalist ideas of ownership and value through scarcity. Their combination of images and text resists the mechanisms of measurement and analysis dominant on social media platforms today, and this should give us

some hope – even within platforms built on the ideology of capitalist realism, our human communality and playfulness can prosper.