**Accelerated Times: post-capitalism and music industry pedagogy**

*by Gareth Thomas*

These are interesting times. Times when razor-sharp critiques of capitalism made just a few years ago now seem outdated. Times when the leftist love of populist masses has turned into an embarrassed revulsion of extreme, polarising populism itself.

Teaching in these times has been equally revelatory in terms of what young people are saying, thinking and feeling about the 2020s and the fissures and breaks in society’s tectonic plates caused by the pandemic, populism, progression, acceleration and revanchism.

In this chapter I aim to present experiences in higher education and in particular music industry pedagogy within the context of a critique of the current conditions of what is commonly described as late-capitalism with a view to capturing the enigmas of post-capitalism.

**Capitalist realism**

Fellow university lecturer and theorist Mark Fisher famously popularised the notion of capitalist realism in his unexpectedly popular book of the same name (Fisher, 2009)

Fisher posited the notion – something which had been hibernating in leftist circles for decades – that capitalism had crept into every crevice of our existence. This wasn’t a new idea, but it was an explicit, contemporary description of a dialectical movement which had first been expounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (Marx and Engels, 1992).

Later, the theory of an ever-encroaching capitalism was picked up by the Frankfurt School thinkers (Horkheiumer and Adorno, 1982) and Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci, 1971). Theirs was the realisation that culture was a corollary aspect of the capitalist machine, reflecting, supporting and reifying its exploitative brutality.

Later still, French theorists Deleuze and Guatarri allied this critique of capitalism’s invasion of our unconscious through invoking Freud and suggesting a return to the pre-oedipal state (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004).

Fisher picked up the mantle in the wake of American philosopher Fredric Jameson declaring that “someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism” (Jameson, 1994).

Original k-punk and founding member of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at the University of Warwick, Fisher was exploring the notions of post-capitalism before he committed suicide in 2017. Since then the cult status he’s achieved online is a testament to his place as one of the foremost radical thinkers of recent times. Following Fisher’s death, world events have shaken up the situation to such a degree that a re-think is in order.

The rupture across society caused by the Trumpians and Brexiteers dragging time back towards the past while young progressives were modelling a new future has been enormous. These divisions have called everything into question, including the music industry and higher education business pedagogy.

The pandemic only served to heighten these divisions while at the same time illustrating the crucial role the previously marginalised and exploited social support jobs play in society.

The Covid pandemic forced upon us the realisation that without healthcare and social care we don’t have a society – just a business and political class feverishly trying to make as much money as possible through a systematic depletion of resources, bearing in mind that ecological pressure is what potentially caused the virus outbreak in the first place (Gillespie, T.R. B.; Chapman, C.A. (2006).

In the UK, train companies are slowly becoming nationalised and the privatised energy sector is in turmoil with 29 UK energy companies having collapsed under the pressure of price increases. The energy crisis reveals the dark, unspoken truth that multiple companies trying to sell exactly the same public good for different prices doesn’t make any sense and renders the government’s neo-liberal mantra of simply “switching” to find a better deal non-sensical. The only reason not to re-nationalise energy is through a blind adherence to the bankrupt ideology of the free market.

So now the so-called Great Resignation reveals that Americans are slowly waking up to the concept of socialism, not as the much-feared evil stepchild of communism, but as a valid political system in its own right which we are, to all intents and purposes, gravitating towards.

The idea of the weekend had been around since the early 19th century, yet it’s only now, some two hundred years later, that the validity and efficacy of a five-day working week is being properly examined.

In the UK, a four-day working week is being piloted by campaign group 4 Day Week Global (4 Day Week, 2022) alongside university academics and is running in parallel with similar programmes in the US, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The governments of Scotland and Spain have also launched trials of the four-day week.

**Ghosts and barometers of change**

Fisher was a music nut and, as such, couldn’t help but include critiques around music into his theories. Perhaps his dalliance with hauntology, which he resurrected from the writings of post-structuralist Jacques Derrida, who declared that “time is out of joint“ (Derrida, 2006), is the most well known iteration of his obsession.

This notion of hauntology in music was perhaps most apparent in the strange vaporwave movement of the early 2010swhen artists re-imagined 80s and 90s synthpop. Outside of music, it is – in essence and inevitably reductively – the notion that the past contains echoes of the future and that past “failures” could be re-evaluated, repositioned and most importantly, reimagined in the context of a ludic “what if?” moment (Fisher, 2014).

Meanwhile in 1977, French writer and political figure Jacques Attali had declared that music is the barometer of social change and that it reflects and indeed anticipates the way society is headed (Attali, 1985).

Attali’s is an interesting notion. Indeed, music has been the first artistic expression to embrace technology – or perhaps the other way around. Radio and audio-video tapes quickly became the media of music and no sooner had Tim Berners-Lee invented the world wide web than music lovers, with a little help from Napster’s Shawn Fanning, were using it to swap music files. YouTube announced its entry to the market with the slogan “Broadcast Yourself” with the idea that you would film yourself doing everyday things – like going to the zoo in the first ever YouTube video – and post it on the platform. But within weeks artists began uploading their music videos on to the site and it quicky became the go-to place to watch music film, swiftly putting paid to MTV in the process.

Traditionally, of course, it is artists who are hyper-sensitive to the times we’re living through and who are naturally equipped with the antennae to express and respond to those changes. From dadaism and surrealism to abstract expressionism and pop art, the visual art avant-gardists were the touchstones of the times and the cultural frontrunners in mapping out the path to advance along towards the future. That was pretty much the case until dada came along and announced the end of art.

It was announcement which, of course, was premature, yet prophetic. The end of art as a radical instrument with which to torture capitalism and at the same time triumph over it was finally put paid to by the Situationists, a number of whom were originally artists – including its leading light the filmmaker himself Guy Debord.

The proto-Situationists got together in northern Italy in 1957 to renounce art and herald the “revolution of everyday life” through the “creation of situations” (Debord, 2006) as its historically necessary replacement. Sure enough, it was Situationist theories which fuelled the Paris riots of May 1968, manifestations of a radical movement which very nearly overturned the government of the day.

Music didn’t suffer the same fate at the hands of the Situationists as the visual arts. On the contrary, more than anything music took the place of art as the medium through which rebellion was expressed and reflected. Through the voices of The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, The Who and The MC5 – among many others – it became the mouthpiece for reflecting and amplifying young people’s dissatisfaction with the old establishment and their dream of a new world.

In the 1970s, popular music slowly became the miserable, phony soundtrack of dropping out and a hippy retreat from society. Mainstream hippies were more concerned with making money than revolution. Branson and his ilk used their alternative ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1977) to reinvigorate capitalism. And he was lucky too to have signed a failing folk singer Mike Oldfield produced Tubular Bells, the mesmeric, metronomic opus which chimed with the monotonously transcendental times.

But music’s inability to *actually* change anything at all came into sharp focus during and after the two-year-long punk explosion which sounded popular music’s death knell. Its radical bankruptcy was finally announced in 1978 by the north-east’s answer to Raoul Vaneigem, Situationist brothers David and Stuart Wise (Wise, 2014)

Music is representation, not real life, and yet the contradiction for the counter-culture lies in the fact that while music may have lost the sense of itself as a force for revolutionary change, people are still drawn to it, a love or talent for music, musicality cannot be denied – just as, ultimately, Debord could not totally renounce his love of film-making.

**Never work**

So, the decision to renounce all art and the making of artefacts in the Situationist times was a painful one for many who sacrificed their creative urges and desires at the altar of revolution. For others the determination to “ne travaillez jamais” (“never work”), an exhortation spray-painted on to the walls of riot-torn Paris in 1968, had equally existential consequences – which doesn’t mean that these idealistic edicts were wrong, just that they were incompatible in terms of operating within a capitalist society.

Darling of the young New Left in the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse had influenced the Situationists in this regard, arguing that human emancipation could only be achieved with the abolition — not the liberation — of labour and with the affirmation of the libido and play in social relations (Marcuse, 1962). His Great Refusal envisioned society’s dregs and cast-offs forming a united front against capital in its refusal to work.

And the “never work” mantra is getting ever closer in terms of realisation within late/post-capitalism with the realities of artificial intelligence and robotics and the notion of a universal wage. There are more mainstream spin-offs too, including the Financial Independence and Early Retirement movement.

This is part of the experimentation in how to live fulfilled lives when, over the past ten thousand years or so, societies have used people, in the words of computer scientist Professor Stuart Russel, as “performative robots” (Russel, 2021).

**Singularity**

Everything is rapidly moving towards its dissolution. This is in a way pure Hegelian Marxism – the proposition that capitalism‘s seeds of destruction lie within the system itself. It is, like everything in nature, subject to entropy. It is not a resurrected culture which opposes the decline of the west, but “the utopia that is silently contained in the image of its decline” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1982).

Part of this inexorable movement is the mad drive towards subjective desire which has been underway for a long time. From the 1960s onwards, this privileging of the self and the innate power of subjectivity was uppermost in much counter-cultural thought – the realisation of the emotional human being in contrast to the machinic nature of capitalism or, more reductively, the little person against The Man. It was underlined more toxically by advertising which began to place *you* at the centre of everything; *you* deserve this product, why shouldn’t *you* have it? because *you’re* worth it”.

This articulates itself now in the realisation of all your needs and desires – from visiting the coolest places and eating great food to “living your best life” and fulfilling and expressing every aspect of yourself (“your truth” in today’s parlance). If something can be imagined it will, inevitably, at some point be reified. Thus, we’ve entered unknowingly into a world of mirrors where we are reflected – and it’s far more mysterious and unknowable and menacing than anything the Situationists could have dreamed up.

This is indeed the desert of the real (Baudrillard, 1994), as referenced by philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2002) and featured in The Matrix (1999) – a kind of hyperreality within a society of the spectacle – the commutation of relationships through images where the metaverse is the spectacle entering its ultimate form.

This drive towards subjective desire is apparent, as Attali suggested it would be, in music too.

When streaming entered the technological landscape, music was the first in line. And livestreaming was accelerated under Covid conditions. Once seen as a complete no-hope platform for live music, it is cementing itself as an alternative way of experiencing live events. It can never replace the sweat, noise, tactility and emotion of being together with others in the same room or field, but it can provide an alternative.

My second-year students had to put on livestreamed gig as part of their Live Music Industry unit. The streams were live gigs, but often with something different – apart from lighting and showtime effects, some featured interviews with the acts in question and fans could react to the show in real time through the chat.

This drive towards realising subjective desires sees music is returning to its roots and the idea that anyone can create music. The gatekeepers have fled and the power of creation is being transferred back into the hands of the people, so that making music, with so-called creator tools, is becoming as easy as filming a TikTok video or recording your own podcast.

The meta-narrative of streaming a live lecture about livestreaming nicely encapsulates where we are now in a time where scientists have posited our universe could be one of many multiverses. We are indeed ”all watched over by machines of loving grace” (Brautigan, 2022). But will this bring us happiness or is it just something we communally dreamed of forever which, in the end of days, we will finally be able to touch before the ecology collapses. In other words are we seeing that rising tide before the tsunami?

Covid has taught us to realign our priorities and reset out psyche to understand what’s important. Now the healthcare worker is as important, if not more so, than the lawyer – even though capital is trenchant in its refusal to acknowledge this is in fair rewards or indeed in any other way. If life can be taken away so easily then our time here becomes more precious, so is it about working mechanically at high speed all your life just to have a comfortable pension when you’re too old to enjoy it?

The acceleration of capitalism saw the American model of resizing – reducing departments incrementally to minimum staffing levels – and multi-tasking (both connoted as positive terms by the corporate elites) spread across the globe. Yet, while in the short term these business practices may work, in the long term it has led to burnout and resentment.

**Atomisation, acceleration and music**

In its sociological sense, atomisation – a notion birthed by the Greek philosophers and scientists – sees the individual as the "atom" of society and therefore the only true object of concern. Early capitalist thinkers like John Locke (1997) and Thomas Hobbes (1969) used the atomic idea to lay the basis to their version of self-interested capitalism, which later developed into free market neo-liberalism.

Harking back to Hegel’s account of alienation (1807) and later that of Lukács (1990), the Situationists claimed that capitalism would triumph if it managed to successfully atomise everyone, if we were all so consumed in ourselves and our own struggles that we abandoned the collective, which has historically been the real people power.

In the wake of a breakdown in cultural and class solidarities, people have been “‘atomised’ and forced onto the market against one another, as competitiors” (Sabbaghzadeh, 2020), where “society was now in an economic Hunger Games, accelerated via digital connectivity”.

But the collective has also been tainted. Left-wing thinkers now find it harder to champion populism after they’ve witnessed the Trump era and the Brexit vote (both powered by the “working class”). In a similar way to when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia and even the more hardcore communist sympathisers in the west began to slough off their Bolshevik skins, left-wing thinkers have been forced to reassess their blind, reverential working-class allegiance and address that abstractive othering of the “people” as a mythical saviour lying outside of ourselves.

Accelerationism and the idea of “sustained growth”, a phrase commonly used by the Conservatives in the 2000s and 2010s as a way of détourning the “sustainability” agenda of the environmental movement, was reimagined by radical thinkers and expressed as the way that revolution – or at least a more equitable society – could be brought about not by the hindering and slowing down of neo-liberalism and the free market, but by accelerating all its most malignant tendencies to a point where the system implodes or is resolved in a final cataclysm.

The idea of acceleration is typically apparent in the cultural dynamics which take place towards the end of a movement, scene or era – from the orgiastic heights before the fall of the Roman Empire and the excesses of Nick Leeson at the tail-end of Yuppieism to the frenzied phone hacking by the tabloids before the collapse in print journalism.

Just like society, the music industry is atomising and accelerating.

Young people are at the forefront of this movement – the students I teach are interested in NFTs, in entrepreneurship, in establishing their own start-ups, in creating experiences, in a return to the physical artefact and in using all the digital tools out there to facilitate exactly what they want to achieve.

Although this has been much slower in this realisation that futurologists were predicting, 3D printing could eventually see everyone have the ability to make their own products at home. Music too moves towards its dénoument. Soon we will all be artists and creators as well as fans.

Now you can have a “record label in your pocket”, as online music distribution company United Artists’ slogan goes. You make a track at home on your computer and you upload it to United Artists, they distribute it for you and you wait for the royalties to roll in – or get snapped up by a major label for big bucks.

If you view the major labels as reflective of corporate greed then this is welcome as a means to their destruction. It’s the triumph of the little man, the independent artist who toils away in their garret. And who now doesn’t have to pray that the major labels that they will sign them up, but can do it all themselves and find their audience, distribute their music and then reap the rewards.

And there’s no reason not to assume that new technologies and trends – such as 5G, social audio and the metaverse – won’t pretty quickly embrace music as part of its world. Moving on from social media groups such as WhatsApp, social audio elevates the audio element. Why spend your time typing when you can talk? That already seems like an alien idea when people did the opposite.

As Attali predicted, music is utilising all the digital tools which are coming of age. Music is at the avant-garde again.

**A young idea**

Young people are, in a true Situationist sense, realising their own desires. But is it all too late? Is this the final swansong before we call get washed away in the flood, baked dry by the sun, frozen by the blocked gulf stream or swept away by gales and high tides in the terrible feedback loop of terminal climate change.

This is also acceleration – like Covid it’s the incremental and, more dangerously, exponential growth of the virus of ecological meltdown of mass extinction.

Generation Z’s mental health issues are the result of, as Debord described it in his overlooked 1971 post-situ tome Living On A Sick Planet (Debord, 2004), the threat of environmental collapse. Even before the idea of the first ever World Environment Day was established, Debord saw the way society was heading. This was ironically also the time when hippy tech geeks were musing on how a digitally connected work could bring about the peace and love they had dreamed of in the 1960s but which was already being brutally repressed in the 1970s.

It was, lest we forget, young people who determinedly drove home to the mainstream the urgency of the agendas of mental health, LGBT rights and racial justice. These are issues which were prominent in the struggles of the 60s and 70s but which, rather unexpectedly, remain unresolved to this day. There is a true heroism in that which young people will probably never be recognised for. But, again, in a world which perhaps even Fisher would not have predicted, the stream is flowing in two opposite directions; one progressive and one deeply conservative. It is change versus stasis writ large.

And that’s why the students seemed to open up during my lecture series on cultural theory as applied to music; this is their world and it was the most positive response I’ve ever had to a unit. Yes, these are difficult questions and theories, but isn’t that what university is all about – challenging stereotypes, fresh thinking, broadening horizons. My students appeared to finally got to where they thought they’d be heading all along, echoing Derrida and his “no difference without alterity, no alterity without singularity, no singularity without here-now“ (Derrida, 2006).

So, it’s often not so much about the information we can feed our students (they can get that anywhere online), it’s more about the context, the societal changes which are taking place, the emerging theories, the way we perceive things.

The students’ high level of receptivity and aliveness to current popular societal debates is an argument for incorporating more contextual studies and cultural theory into the curricula of business school pedagogy.

**Influence, confluence and socialism**

The students are coming at this from their own desires and perspectives. It’s a subjective drive towards realisation of everything. It’s what the radicals dreamed about and it’s happening but it’s taking place in an accelerated frenzy under the cloud of a pandemic and under the spreading shadow of climate change.

Teaching in a time where everything is available online raises fundamental questions about the profession itself and the idea is being challenged of what value a human being can add to the algorithms and search engines, datasets, information highways and rabbit holes of today. We can provide anecdotes and context, a human face and storytelling, be an inspirer and guide. We can, as suggested, expand horizons, discuss theories and explore societal change but, just as holograms and avatars exist in the world of music, we can be replaced by a version of ourselves delivering content.

This accelerationist tendency is apparent in how the mainstream has become the radical stream, in how Daily Mail readers have become Covid-deniers demonstrating on the streets and in the way football fans chant political songs denouncing BJ as a c \*\*\*. In how the word “revolution” can roll off the tongue of the man in the street.Ironically, in the spirit of acceleration, one of the things AI could excel at is education, providing the tailored “individual learning plan” many universities are striving for. There is a certain amount of trepidation among academics that their lectures, now recorded and with the copyright belonging to the university, can be simply made available to students next year while tutors become, literally, redundant.

Interestingly – and no doubt coincidentally – the software used by a number of universities to record and archive lectures is called Panopto – calling to mind Bentham’s prison control system (Bentham, 2017) and, more currently, the all-seeing eye of Artificial Intelligence – while one of the most common university financial management systems is called Agresso.

We are in the age of influence. A music business gradate I was talking to recently referred to “socialism” during our conversation, but the way he used the word was imbued with the concept of the influencer. Socialism, for him, connoted social media. In other words he viewed the real power in society as having shifted towards those who have, to quote Bourdieu “social capital”. Social media kudos and caché are the modern forms of social capital and will, in the student’s eyes, foreshadow the path of social-ism.

In his eyes – and this is a grand re-interpretation of the Marxist strand of thinking – “social capital” in this day and age is the ability to change people’s ideas, to create a groundswell and shift opinion. Elon Musk has that power, whether that be raising the awareness of autism or inflating the price of cryptocurrencies.

**Conclusion**

The world of automation is beset by visions of machines taking over, the morbid take on singularity as exacted on humanity by Skynet the Terminator films (the first email service was called Arpanet), But it has an equally bucolic, gentle aspect where creativity is liberated in a golden age of fulfilment of human potential and “visions of the ‘epoch of rest’ (Morris) can energize and compel us to action” (Jameson, 2004).

In a reification of Situationist theory, it will be the practice of real life which will be the playground and workplace of the future. When real robots finally take over the grunt work of capitalist drudgery, the creation of situations will replace the mechanistic slavery of capitalist production where previously “machinic desire (…) rips up political cultures, deletes traditions, dissolves subjectivities, and hacks through security apparatuses, tracking a soulless tropism to zero control”(Land, N, 2017).

And this is exactly what’s happening with the so-called Great Resignation, with people actively turning their backs on the nine-to-five, clocked-on, psychic servitude of consumer capitalism.

This is the world dreamed of by the internet pioneers and radical thinkers, the haunted fragments of utopia hidden in the folds of historical time, the freedom from slave labour and the instinctive, desire for creating community.

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