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Haunting and Hauntology in Hilary Mantel's *Beyond Black*

The figure of “the outsider” is a vexed one. Who is afforded outsider status, and what are the ethics of this designation? Does it serve to affirm identity around what somebody is *not*, or does it only highlight the injustice of an exclusion? Is it possible to think of oneself as an outsider or is it something which is, by definition, thrust upon someone? In many ways, it is through history-making, building an image of the past, that we affirm ourselves within time and the world. Hilary Mantel describes how:

We carry the genes and culture of our ancestors, and what we think about them shapes what we think of ourselves and how we make sense of our time and place. Are these good times, bad times, interesting times? We rely on history to tell us.¹

And yet, as Mantel concedes, the work of the historian is ‘messy, dubious, an argument that never ends.’² If history is the messy business Mantel describes, how do we relate to and situate ourselves within it?

Francois-Jean Lyotard tackles a similar question in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979). Lyotard famously critiques the grand or metanarrative, that is, authoritative and homogenous accounts of “events” in favour of conceiving history as ‘a heterogeneity of elements’³ guided by ‘local determinism[s]’ (Lyotard, p. 73). The mode of history that Lyotard advocates emphasises the subjective and varied accounts of historical events over the possibility of a consistent historical narrative. This model encourages a deeper appreciation of the messiness of memory and helps us to approach the vast and turbulent “past”.

And yet, our liberation from the grand narrative contains the adverse effect of historical alienation. If we cannot narrate the past with authority, where does this leave our conception of ourselves within history? Many have argued that this disjuncture is at its heart a white, male,

¹ Hilary Mantel, ‘The day is for the living’, *The BBC Reith Lectures* Available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08tcbrp>> p. 2

² Hilary Mantel, ‘The Iron Maiden’, *The BBC Reith Lectures* Available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08v08m5>> p. 4 [Hereafter, RL2]

³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, ‘From The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge’ in *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader* ed. Bran Nicol (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) pp. 72-90 (p. 73)

European wounding. The founders of postmodern thought, themselves a predominantly white, male, European class have come late to the party. Scholars from postcolonial, feminist and Marxist disciplines have pushed back against the apparent epiphany of the postmodern. Meaghan Morris identifies postmodernism's 'heavy (if lightly acknowledged) borrowings from feminist theory'⁴. Stuart Hall writes from a diasporic, migrant perspective: 'Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I become centred. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be *the* representative modern experience!'⁵ bell hooks condemns postmodern discourses as 'exclusionary even as they call attention to, appropriate even, the experience of 'difference and 'Otherness''⁶.

This element of appropriation is key, what Morris, Hall and hooks all identify is postmodernism's adoption of deconstructive strategies which pre-date its conception with little to no acknowledgement or sense of irony. The experience of historical alienation, and thus alienation from oneself, is not in any way new. It has been historically experienced by women, diasporic populations and anyone else excluded from political and cultural enfranchisement. Postmodernism has sought to construct a de-gendered, de-classed and de-racialised monopoly on alienation. In short, outsiderhood, if felt by everyone, is meaningless.

Marxist critics have similarly taken issue with postmodernism's insistence upon history as a proliferation of localisms. Mark Fisher, in his work on Hauntology, pushes against this fundamental contention. In his essay, 'What is Hauntology?', Fisher concurs with Frederick Jameson's critique of postmodernism as the expression of a late capitalist failure of imagination. Fisher cites Marc Augé's description of the late capitalist landscape as 'the "non-place"'⁷ as evidence of this imaginative

⁴ Meaghan Morris, 'Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism' in *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader* ed. Bran Nicol (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) pp. 390-395 (p. 391)

⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Minimal Selves' in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* ed. Baker et al. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1996) pp. 114-119 (p. 114)

⁶ bell hooks, 'Postmodern Blackness' in *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader* ed. Bran Nicol (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) pp. 421-428 (p. 421)

⁷ Mark Fisher, 'What is Hauntology?' in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No 1 (Fall 2012) pp. 16-24 (p. 19) Available at: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16>>

failure. Examples of non-places include ‘airports, retail parks, and chain stores which resemble one another more than they resemble the particular spaces in which they are located’ (Fisher, p. 19). Far from the postmodern urge towards localisms, late capitalist landscapes are characterised by what Fisher calls ‘The erosion of spatiality’ (Fisher, p. 19). Through the processes of global capital, our sense of place becomes confused as everywhere is homogenized.

This homogenization is indicative of a broader failure of late capitalist culture to produce innovative works. Fisher cites the development and subsequent failure of electronic music (once seen as the cutting edge) to evoke the futuristic as an example of this:

If electronic music was “futuristic,” it was in the sense that fonts are “gothic” – the futuristic now connoted a settled set of concepts, affects, and associations. Twenty-first-century electronic music has failed to progress beyond what had been recorded in the twentieth century [...] Electronic music has succumbed to its own inertia and retrospection. (Fisher, p. 16)

This sense of inertia and retrospection is the essential character of the hauntological. As Fisher observes: ‘What haunts the digital cul-de-sacs of the twenty-first century is not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate.’ (Fisher, p. 16) The hauntological mourns futures which failed to materialise as evoking the futuristic is no longer possible.

Our position of living ‘after the future’ (Fisher, p. 16) indicates late capitalism’s erosion of temporality in addition to spatiality, the former induced by the latter. The resulting temporal landscape is one which is “out of joint”, as Fisher describes it is ‘characterized by a particular kind of anachronism’ (Fisher, p. 17) and ‘dominated by what Jameson calls the “nostalgia mode”’ (Fisher, p. 17). The turn to the nostalgic is a compensatory effect for what Fisher dubs ‘The Slow Cancellation of the Future’⁸. The turn to the past is, in Fisher’s view, ‘intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenisation of time and space’ (Fisher, p. 19) as temporality is re-established through its own bending.

⁸ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of my Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2014) p. 2

As this paper will explore, this late capitalist anachronism and nostalgia has important implications for outsiders. If late capitalism is backwards looking, we must ask what it is we are constructing as our past and who is included in it. Hilary Mantel's *Beyond Black* (2005) takes the spectral metaphors of hauntology and renders them literal. The novel follows the medium Alison Hart and her stage manager/strained companion Colette. The pair travel Britain's commuter belt, performing their psychic roadshow and consoling their audiences with messages from the spirit world. Alison's audiences are comforted and beguiled by her act, and yet, the spirit world Alison experiences is far darker than she allows them to see. Alison is haunted and tormented by a group of ghosts from her childhood, a crew of men known collectively as "the fiends" and headed by Morris, Alison's foul-mouthed spirit guide who proves a gruesome burden rather than an aide.

The setting of *Beyond Black* is equally grim, populated by a mixture of 'outcasts and escapees'⁹; 'perjured ministers and burnt-out paedophiles' (*BB*, p. 2). The commuter belt is described uncharitably as somewhere 'where nobody comes from, these south-eastern towns with their floating populations and car parks where the centre should be.' (*BB*, pp. 16-17) The populations of these towns are modernity's flotsam and jetsam, displaced communities inhabiting the failed new towns of post-war Britain. In some ways they are the consummate outsiders, neither urban or rural, inhabiting the liminal and transient towns that nobody is "from".

In a 2005 interview on *Beyond Black*, Mantel describes how 'The link between our landscape and our memory [has been] cut'¹⁰. This image of severance on one hand evokes the postmodern wound as certainty, narrative and memory are thrown into question. And yet, it more accurately concurs with Fisher's discussion of the non-place, indeed, *Beyond Black* is a novel filled with non-places from shopping centres to service stations. One memorable instance is a description of a pub named 'The Fig and Pheasant' which is worth quoting at length:

⁹ Hilary Mantel, *Beyond Black* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005) p. 1

¹⁰ Writers and Company, "'Beyond Black" with author Hilary Mantel (2005 interview)' Available at: <<https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2178638241>>

The Fig and Pheasant [...] had once been a coaching inn, and its frontage was still spattered with the exudates of a narrow, busy A-road. In the sixties it had stood near-derelict and draughty [...] In the seventies it was bought by a steakhouse chain and Tudorised, fitted with plywood oak-stained panels and those deep-buttoned settles covered in stainproof plush of which the Tudors were so fond. It offered the novelty of baked potatoes wrapped in foil with butter or sour cream, and a choice of cod or haddock in breadcrumbs, accompanied by salad or greyish and lukewarm peas. With each decade [...] experiments in theming had succeeded each other, until its original menu had acquired retro-chic, and prawn cocktails had reappeared. [...] There were dusty rucked curtains and vaguely William Morris wallpaper [...] In the sports bar, where smoking was banned, the ceilings were falsely yellowed, to simulate years of tobacco poisoning; it had been done thirty years ago, and no one saw any reason to interfere with it. (*BB*, p. 360).

‘The Fig and Pheasant’ exemplifies the kind of anonymous “non-place” Fisher describes, its anachronistic furnishings and menu evoke countless chain pubs throughout Britain.

This late capitalist anachronism is not only presented by Mantel as a critique of kitsch but is central to the novel’s exploration of the spirit world and the sinister edge of nostalgia. In her 2005 interview, Mantel discusses the turn to mediums and spiritualism in modernity:

There’s been an enormous move on people’s part to explore their family history [...] previously this kind of thing was driven by snobbery; you wanted to find out you were descended from a lord. Now I think it’s just driven by “Who am I?” and I think that the psychic business [...] is driven by a similar imperative: Who am I, and where do I fit? Where do I fit in this landscape? And where do I fit in the pattern of the universe? People have so much lost their roots [...] and again I think there is a pervasive fear of feeling that people’s lives are out of their own control. (Mantel, ‘2005 interview’)

The drive towards the psychic is born, in Mantel’s view, of an essential need to heal the cut between memory and landscape, to resituate oneself within the world and within history in a time that feels spatially and temporally alienated. Mantel goes so far as to describe mediumship as ‘a healing art’ (Mantel, ‘2005 interview’).

However, this is not an art that Mantel idealises or endorses, indeed, *Beyond Black* pushes against popular spiritualism as a mechanism for distorting the past. In her Reith lecture entitled ‘The Iron Maiden’, Mantel speaks of history-making and asks: ‘Are we looking into the past, or looking into a mirror?’ (*RL2*, p. 6). And, if we are looking into a mirror, do we only look for our most flattering selves? Whilst Alison’s audiences are alienated from their past, they are still the white, middle-class suburbans for whom historical amnesia is a luxury. If Alison’s audiences have come to “discover their

roots”, there is also the sense that, to quote the novel ‘maybe they don’t want to acknowledge roots, or recall their grimy places of origin and their illiterate foremothers’ (*BB*, p. 17). They want, much like the family historian, to find that they are from noble stock.

Much of Alison’s act, however, is not focused upon the past but is rather an exercise in consolation for the bereaved. Audience members come to hear about the fate of their loved ones and their happy existence in the spirit world. Alison describes the spirit world as:

[...] a garden, or to be more accurate a public place in the open air: litter-free like an old-fashioned park [...] Here the dead sit in rows on benches, families together, on gravelled paths between weed-less beds, where heat-sozzled flowers bob their heads [...] their petals crawling with furry, intelligent, stingless bees. There’s a certain 1950’s air about the dead, or early sixties perhaps, because they’re clean and respectable and they don’t stink of factories: as if they came after white nylon shirts and indoor sanitation, but before satire, certainly before sexual intercourse. [...] The dead have no sense of time, no clear sense of place; they are beyond geography and history. (*BB*, pp. 43-44)

This location of the dead, ‘beyond geography and history’ (*BB*, p. 44) fully evokes the late capitalist sense of temporal and spatial erosion. Alison’s audiences do not want the dead to manifest before them, indeed, Alison reassures her audience that ‘you’re not going to see anything that will frighten you.’ (*BB*, p. 15) The dead are, ironically, mirrored back to their audience as existing in the same anachronistic landscape with no solid point of historical reference and ‘no sense of time, no clear sense of place’ (*BB*, p. 44). The audiences have come not for their loved ones, but to see their better selves. If the Fig and Pheasant is for the living, the public park of the afterlife is an alluring prospect.

Ironically, the audience’s sense of alienation is the means by which they are insulated from history and its darker elements. What Alison offers in her show is a sanitised, ahistorical account of the dead who happily inhabit, much like the living, a space outside of historical responsibility. As Fisher asserts, anachronism, such as that described in Alison’s spirit world, serves to reinstate temporality in a temporally eroded world. In essence, the audience wants nostalgia, the ‘1950’s air about the dead’ (*BB*, p. 43) and not the dead themselves.

As *Beyond Black* progresses, we discover that Alison's description of spirit world is fundamentally deceptive. The dead, far from being clean and kindly, are more malign than Alison lets on. As she says to Colette: 'You don't get a personality transplant when you're dead. You don't suddenly get a degree in philosophy.' (*BB*, p. 98) Most importantly, the dead do not exist *beyond* the world but are very much within it in a material sense. Alison's vocation is not voluntary either, she describes how 'Messages from the dead arrive at random. You don't want them and you can't send them back' (*BB*, p. 1) Alison does not access the dead but is rather plagued by their presence.

Alison is plagued most of all by Morris, her spirit "guide". To the punters, Alison describes him as 'a little circus clown [...] a darling little bloke, always laughing, tumbling, doing his tricks' (*BB*, p. 35). When we first meet him, however, he is:

sprawled out in [Alison's] chair [...] He had his dick out and his foreskin pushed back [...] She evicted him with a dig to his shin from her pointed toe; dropped herself into the vacated chair – she shuddered from the heat of it (*BB*, p. 30)

Morris is grotesquely solid, not a guide but a constant spectral hindrance, not a nostalgic hauntology but an actual haunting. Alison wishes passionately that 'he'd just lurch off one night and not come back; that he'd have an accident, get a blow on the head that would affect his memory' (*BB*, p. 48). This solidity directly contradicts our iconic image of the ethereal spirit upon which Alison relies to conjure up her spirit world for her audiences. In Morris, we are given the crudest, grimmest example of the unquiet dead.

When Alison threatens to leave the psychic trade, Morris responds:

you don't frighten me, gel, if you go and work in the chemist I shall make myself into a pill. If you get a job in a cake shop I shall roll myself into a Swiss roll and spill out jam at inopportune moments. If you try scrubbing floors I will rise up splosh! out of your bucket in a burst of black water causing you to get the sack. (*BB*, p. 412)

Alison's psychic power, her unfiltered experience of the past, is a curse rather than a gift. She longs for a time where she will no longer hear the dead chattering away to her, this is the essential difference between Alison and her audience: Alison sees the past and does not want it, her

audiences want “the past” and do not see it. Alison cannot escape history no matter how hard she tries.

Alison longs to exist in the same homogenous non-place, non-time as her punters. Indeed, the latter half of the novel consists of Alison and Colette moving into a new-build property. They purchase a plot of land for development before the house has even been built, when Colette informs Alison that it has no place on any map, Alison replies that ‘I’d like to live nowhere’ (*BB*, p. 221). She is taken by the new build in its complete lack of history, primarily because it cannot host a ghost like Morris:

not among our hygienic granite-look worktops. There is no crack or corner and there is no place to hide in our stainless-steel double oven; not without the risk of being cooked. At her [Alison’s] mum’s house [...] the sink had been an old-style wooden draining board, reeking, mouldy, sodden to the touch. For Morris [...] it had been his natural home. He insinuated himself through the spongy fibres and lay there breathing wetly, puffing through his mouth and snorting through his nose. (*BB*, p. 244)

The very newness of the new build exemplifies the type of historical insulation the non-place provides, the past cannot worm its way in and fester. As Alison reveals: ‘She hates history: unless its on television, safe behind glass.’ (*BB*, p. 41)

Here we can see the crucial difference between the anachronism of hauntology and the uncanniness of a genuine haunting. Whereas anachronism is experienced as time periods overlapping, for example, a faux-tudorised pub or a 1950’s afterlife beyond time and space, haunting is the past that lives, breathes and affects us within the present. Anachronism functions on our stereotypes of the past, haunting functions on the shattering of those stereotypes as a truer history bleeds through.

Alison’s longing for a cordon sanitaire between herself and her past, the figures of her childhood who will not remain dead, demonstrates *Beyond Black’s* central critique of historical amnesia. The turn of Alison’s audience to a sanitised dead, is symptomatic of their temporal and spatial alienation. Alison’s contrasting hyper and super sensitivity to the past demonstrates the true

cost of historical consciousness: our past and our ancestors may be far uglier than we would like to admit. The sense of a generalised dispersal felt by the inhabitants of Britain's commuter belt is the means for their insulation from historical responsibility. Whilst they may wish for contact with "the other side" they are not aware or prepared for what this really means. In *Beyond Black*, Horror doesn't lie in the bland anonymity of the suburban non-place but in the possibility of its disruption, when history breaks through the television screen. As Alison says to Collette 'they'd run a mile' (BB, p. 32).