

Michael Jackson, Mark Fisher, and the Pedagogy of Weird Audio

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Readers of my [posts](#) will know that I have an attachment to the pedagogy of audio.ⁱ It is my claim that there is a quality to learning through the mode of an audio essay – an essay that uses the audio *medium* to some effect – that the written form cannot muster. Audio essays are interesting structurally, allowing for harmonization to take place between the signifiers and the sounds. The drop of a beat or

the swelling of a synth might be accompanied by a didactic crescendo, or, contrapuntally, not. Audio is an easy way to establish tone and mood, hence a euphonic (or discordant) sound might accompany the signifiers and imbue them with atmospheric semantics – sound that helps shape lexical meaning. Such structural play also contributes to the essay’s praxis for dethroning the educational hegemony of the article and the lecture.

The audio essay thus intones its logic and critique in a manner the written essay cannot. Its scope is most interestingly explored by Mark Fisher through lens of the *weird* and the *erie*, concepts similar to Freud’s *unheimlich* though with subtle differences and a pedagogical force (Stock 2021a). The eerie concerns ‘questions to do with existence and non-existence: ...*why is there nothing here when there should be something?*’ The weird is a ‘sense of wrongness . . . the conviction that this does not belong’ (Fisher 2016, 13). Both are questions of presence/absence. Fisher’s audio essay [On Vanishing Land](#) practised them, a spectral recount of a trip to the Suffolk coast imbued with hauntological spirits. The reverb filled music and accompanying narrative voice are both weird and eerie, unwelcome presences, disquieting ambience. The essay thus ceases to simply be

an argument or theory, but rather becomes an uncanny world with its own atmosphere and environment.

The uncanny world of audio is of pedagogical concern,ⁱⁱ though the example I wish to explore is not an audio essayist but problematic “King of Pop” Michael Jackson. Once again, Mark Fisher offers fruit: Jackson’s ‘sonic fictional space’ (2009, 15) is an eerie and solitary place, accompanied by music videos that depict nocturnal wanderings down ‘mean streets’ through ‘an inner city ravaged by Reaganomics’ (15). But it is the *audio* medium that punctuates the unsettling atmosphere of his world. Slamming doors, cackles of laughter, and the instrument of his voice, suffused with ‘asignifying hiccups and yelps, as if he is gasping for air’ (15), are the sounds of a space out of joint; even the soulful party track *Off the Wall*ⁱⁱⁱ is aurally disturbing. Lyrically, too, it is a world populated with horrors – there are ‘bloodstains on the carpet’ and on ‘the dancefloor’, ‘a creature creepin’ up behind’. You are always ‘playin’ with your life’. In Jackson’s sonic world things do not belong... are absent... it is unfamiliar and yet so appealing.

The logo for 'pesgb' is a dark teal square with the lowercase letters 'pesgb' in a white, sans-serif font centered within it.

The pedagogy lies in the sonic world that Jackson has created; as listeners we traverse the weird and eerie space that he does, undergoing an uncanny experience of briefly living in a world not quite like ours. Jackson's success was a 'symptom' (1) of the neoliberal age: the sonic world that his mythos exists in is purely an embodiment of this time. When we ceaselessly bought his music, tickets, t-shirts and posters, it suggests we were happy to inhabit his world too, even if it was clearly haunted. How can we now look at that weird and eerie place and think, *yes, that is where I belong?* Because, of course, it is our world. We live there already, alongside the ghosts, gangsters and monsters that he did. The Thatcher/Reagan closure of industry is reimaged as dance-floor killers. The beasts and shuffling zombies are his listeners, little more than zombies sleepwalking into a further entrenchment of capitalist enframing. As Fisher infamously [says](#), 'the zombies [capital] makes are us'.

Not every audio essay will be like Michael Jackson's back catalogue. But it provides a significant case study in the pedagogy of weird audio as first expressed by Fisher. It demonstrates how the audio *teaches* us something structurally, to see our own world in another

way. We might wonder looking forward, how does this become a method for in the classroom and beyond it? How does the audio essay take hold, and what effects might it have when its weirdness and eeriness are harnessed like they were for Jackson? So, the next piece you write, think about the world you are trying to create. Put the pen down and pick up the drum machine.

Endnotes

ⁱ As does Emile Bojesen; see his [track](#) riffing on Illich's *Deschooling Society*.

ⁱⁱ Bojesen's *Deschooling Society*, for example, is a machinic world of echoes and discord, a place where education does not occur in formalised and archaic patterns.

ⁱⁱⁱ To really experience the weirdness of Jackson's music, it is best listened to in its [vaporwave remixed form](#). Vaporwave is 'electronic music that samples and loops fragments of retro pop music, muzak, advertisements, or ostensibly anything audible from previous decades... It allows me to bathe in the futures dreamt up in the late twentieth century' (Stock 2021b).

References

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