

Hauntology, Or the Cultural Logic of Neoliberalism

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Abstract

Mark Fisher argued that twenty-first century neoliberal culture is haunted by “lost futures” – futures that were “cancelled” and thus failed to happen. This was evident in the way that popular culture from the 2000s onwards had resorted to recycling and reusing old styles whilst appearing “new”. His thesis proposed that this haunted culture was made possible by the disappearance of the conditions enabling artists to produce genuinely new culture. By the mid-2000s Fisher identified certain artists that had picked up on this condition, producing artwork and albums that could be considered “hauntological” in their mixing of past, present and future together in a way that postmodernism had failed to do. Importantly, Fisher had adapted the idea of hauntology from the French Philosopher Jacques Derrida, who had confined its use to the strictly philosophical realm, where it appeared to be somewhat detached from reality. Fisher therefore introduced hauntology to a more popular audience. With specific reference to the artist Laura Grace Ford, the musician Burial, and various vaporwave artists I use Fredric Jameson’s method of analysing texts through the ‘political unconscious’, arguing that more than declaring culture to be “haunted”, the “hauntologists” actually attempt to restore a sense of history and class politics (although not always successfully or coherently) to a culture and society trying so hard to suppress those things; and that further to this, the texts in question even try to present an “imaginary resolution” to Fisher’s “Capitalist Realism”: the idea that “there is no alternative” to our current socioeconomic system.

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Introduction

This essay is principally concerned with the relationship between hauntology and neoliberalism, and, more specifically, that the former is indeed a cultural expression of the latter. As the reader will note throughout this text, hauntology (as theory and practice) is fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies that make it no less a precise expression of neoliberalism, if it is understood early on that neoliberalism is by no means a consistent and unified organising system. Although the most vibrant debate and writing on hauntology took place several years ago, the importance of discussing the subject today should not be understated. As streaming services like Spotify and Netflix continue to further monopolise and standardise cultural consumption, it becomes necessary to reflect upon how and where resistance, and the search for ‘alternatives’, is to be found; what does this look like? And sound like? As I hope to demonstrate throughout this essay, hauntology is a limited yet revealing method of searching the past, present and future for these alternatives.

The essay is essentially structured in two parts with their respective subdivisions: the first section consists of a long discussion on defining hauntology, neoliberalism and postmodernism, providing historical context, attendant theory, as well as an assessment of the literature surrounding these key topics and relevant methodology – this section closes with an historical genealogically charting the emergence of hauntology in the present moment; the second section brings the preceding considerations to bear on two case studies – the art of Laura Grace Ford and the music of Burial, followed by a discussion of the vaporwave genre – all of whom work in and around the genre of hauntology. Dividing the text in this way has allowed me to devote enough space to properly contextualising and situating hauntology within the present conjuncture.

I begin by exploring some of the most popular definitions of hauntology given by philosopher Jacques Derrida and the late theorist and critic Mark Fisher. These definitions are historically situated as responding to the ‘End of History’ thesis promulgated by Francis Fukuyama, from which Fisher would

later develop his concept of ‘Capitalist Realism’, to which hauntology directly responds to in the present. From here it becomes necessary to properly introduce and define ‘Neoliberalism’, understood as the historically specific organisation of the capitalist system around finance capital, producing the material and ideological conditions for hauntology to emerge. Having defined these concepts, I move on to some of the most prominent critics, taking stock of how hauntology was received in the academy shortly after its first appearance in Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994), before swiftly moving on once again to define and historically situate all of the above within what Mark Fisher and Franco Berardi termed “the slow cancellation of the future” – a phrase best understood using postmodern theory (distinguished from “postmodernity”), of which I provide an overview and consideration of hauntology’s proximity to postmodernism. Fisher’s Hauntology is preoccupied with this “slow cancellation of the future”, purportedly beginning in 1979 and enduring through to the present day, in which the “Nostalgia Industry” is targeted by Fisher and others as contributing to this period of cultural, political and economic stagnation.

At this point it will be necessary to talk about method. I lean heavily on the work of the Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson, whose book *The Political Unconscious* (2002) has been indispensable in formulating a framework to properly examine the texts in the later sections. As will be demonstrated later in the text, Jameson insists that analyses must attempt to reveal the “historicity” of a text, restoring the repressed metanarrative operating below any surface level reading. History is, therefore, both internal and external to the text. The second important feature of Jameson’s method is the prioritisation of the social context – that it is to be understood as the very *problem* that the text attempts to work out or resolve in some way. This is why I have developed my analysis towards revealing how artists such as Burial and Laura Grace Ford use their art to uncover the repressed alternatives to life under neoliberalism; they stage *the problem*, and provide some form of *resolution*. However, talk of an abstract historical narrative is little use without a thorough explanation of its content. As such, following the method, I provide a brief overview of the historical genealogy that formed the “objective conditions” for hauntology to emerge: I

discuss the Futurist movement during the early twentieth century, the post-punk/“popular modernist” moment of the 1970s and 80s and contrasts these future oriented movements to that of the “dystopian turn” beginning in the 1960s. This section concludes by identifying that what Hauntology chiefly responds to is the “disappearance of the future” as well as “the inability to even imagine any alternative”.

Here, the second section of the essay begins with the case study of the two British “hauntologists”, the first of which – Burial – is a form of sonic hauntology that mourns the disappearance of a sense of the future. His creative foregrounding of “materiality” through what Mark Fisher termed the “metaphysics of crackle” upsets any notion of linear time, leaving listeners unsure of exactly when the music might have been produced. The second case study in this section considers the work of Laura Grace Ford, author of the *Savage Messiah* fanzines. Working in a different medium, Ford achieves a similar sense of temporal disjunction through chronologically inconsistent micro-narratives that jump abruptly from one to the next, mixing place names, dates and people. Her principal target is the built environment of London and its many suburbs, conjuring up a decadent and decaying city through which utopian visions of past hopes are glimpsed only fleetingly, before hurriedly moving on to the next. In the third and final case study I analyse the vaporwave music genre, interrogating its hauntological dimensions and posing questions about how anti-capitalist the genre actually is. I look at both the sonic and visual aspects of the genre, drawing on numerous examples of album artwork, lyrics and composition to help determine the hauntological properties at work. These include a rampant nostalgia for 1990s consumerism and technology, crackly and glitchy audio samples, and a comical aversion to modern day marketing and public relations. Finally, I conclude by offering a balanced judgement on how effective hauntology is as a vehicle for imagining alternatives to the present neoliberal mode of socio-economic organisation.

PART ONE

Hauntology/Neoliberalism/Postmodernism: Definitions & Theory

‘Spectre’ or ‘specter’?

A note on spelling: it is more common in the US to use the latter spelling, hence why most references and titles will use ‘specter’, although ‘spectre’ is said to be the preferred spelling elsewhere and so will be used throughout the main body.

What is Hauntology?

Understood as a ‘punctum’ on ontology - the philosophical concept of the study of what can be said to exist - hauntology supersedes some of Jacques Derrida’s earlier concepts within the post-structuralist method in Deconstruction, such as *différance* and the ‘trace’ which hold that nothing ever enjoys a completely positive existence; everything must differentiate itself from something else, therefore creating a system of absences to be defined against. In Derrida’s own words: “To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time.” (1994:202). Hauntology is unique in comparison to these previous methods as it deals with time in a quite singular manner: whereas ontology attempts to understand ‘being’ in relation to other objects and beings within an extant hierarchy, hauntology attempts to understand being in terms of its ‘spectres’, that which is never fully present and possesses no being of its own, but marks a relation to *what was*, but is no longer, or even *what could be*. It is this temporal uncertainty that distinguishes hauntology from ontology, and is summed up perfectly in the words of Warren Montag: “To speak of spectres, the lexicon of ontology is insufficient. Ontology speaks only of what is present or what is absent; it cannot conceive of what is neither” (1999:71). For Mark Fisher, it is useful to develop an understanding of hauntology as “the agency of the virtual”

(2014a:18) as late capitalist society demands our complicity in accepting virtualities, perhaps best exemplified by the abstractions of finance: on 15th August 1971, US president Richard Nixon suspended the gold convertibility of the dollar, the first time that money, in all of its ancient history, had ever been unanchored to a metallic base determining its fungibility (Tooze, 2018) – the moment which cemented money into a political creation. Of course, Theodor Adorno identified this ‘virtuality’ decades ago when he described gold as a mere social relation whose “genuineness” is abstracted as a proportion of fine metal bearing no objective relation to the money form it determines (2020:166). In this sense, gold could never be understood (ontologically) as the “foundation” of the money form anyway as its exchange value depends upon everyone recognising what it stands for but can never actually be; untethering money from precious metal simply made this abstraction explicit. With the unfettered reign of fiat currency since abandoning the gold standard, the majority of global currency exists today in digital format, and so identifying money as the most ubiquitous form of ‘the virtual’ should provide ample justification for a discourse founded upon spectres, ghosts and other abstractions. These virtualities operate in two directions: the first concerns that, which in actuality, *no longer exists*, but is able to *haunt* as a virtual entity; in psychoanalytic terms this could be understood as the traumatic compulsion to repeat a fatal pattern. The second direction refers to that, which in actuality, has not yet happened, but takes place in the realm of the virtual; something that is an *anticipation*, having the power to manipulate current behaviour. Hauntological media tends to combine these two elements, often resulting in a “future contained within the past” type scenario whereby historicity (a sense of history) is foregrounded, yet confused with elements of the present and/or future.

Returning to Derrida’s conception of hauntology, his book *Specters of Marx* was not only reorganising aspects of his theory of deconstruction, but was addressing the immediate historical context following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The following year saw the publication of Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*, a work of political philosophy expounding his idea that the socialist model was no longer a force to be reckoned with; that the human race had reached the

final stage in ideological evolution, and that western liberal democracy could reign free as the dominant global force (1992: xi). Derrida challenged this celebration of unfettered capitalist reign by engaging with the disappearance of the ‘spectre of communism’:

“There is today in the world a dominant discourse [...] This dominating discourse often has the manic, jubilatory, and incantatory form that Freud assigned to the so-called triumphant phase of mourning work. The incantation repeats and ritualizes itself, it holds forth and holds to formulas, like any animistic magic, to the rhythm of a cadenced march, it proclaims: Marx is dead, communism is dead, very dead, and along with its hopes, its discourse, its theories, and its practices. It says: long live capitalism, long live the market, here’s to the survival of economic and political liberalism!” (Derrida, 1994:64)

Derrida is speaking broadly about what was once simply “late capitalism”, but has transformed into what Mark Fisher termed “Capitalist Realism” (this phrase is to be understood as coterminous with ‘neoliberalism’), in the sense that the dogmatism orchestrated by governments and the media today all deliver the same message: there is no alternative. Fisher writes: “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” (2009:2). Derrida confronts the ‘realism’ of Fukuyama’s thesis with the ultimate spectre: “the spectre of communism” as a way of thinking that challenges the dominant discourse of the time. Why the spectre of communism specifically though? Gramsci’s theory of domination is edifying in constructing an answer to this question: all capitalist societies are organised by hegemony, that is, a society controlled by the *hegemon* (the ruling class, the elites), who impose upon subordinate classes a system which is not beneficial to them, but to the imperial and expansionist interests of the *hegemon* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). And the reason as to why these dominated classes remain subordinate is, of course, the manufacturing of consent; very broadly then, can hegemony be defined as “a whole range of political strategies by which a dominant power elicits *consent* to its rule from those it subjugates”, and to win hegemony “[...] is to establish moral, political and intellectual leadership in social life by diffusing one’s own ‘world view’ throughout the fabric of society as a whole , thus equating one’s own interests with the interests of society at large.” (Eagleton, 2007:115-116, italics mine). (It is also worth mentioning that the

concept of hegemony was the first to greatly enhance the already rich notion of ideology: it effected the crucial transition from ideology understood as the ‘world of ideas’ to ideology as ‘lived experience’; ideology as embodied in material reality through what Althusser categorised as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA); the former being the use of soft power to obtain consent through state affiliated institutions such as schools, churches, the family, political parties, culture, and communications; the latter being the hard power commanded by the state to *enforce* consent if it cannot be maintained without repression, including the police, the military, the courts and prisons (2020:17). All of which led Althusser to his great definition: “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (2020:36). It is this understanding of hegemony, and the more nuanced understanding of ideology that will inform the discussion on whether or not hauntology (as a media practice) can be read as counter-hegemonic.)

Neoliberalism

David Harvey’s analysis of neoliberalism in his *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) confirms its status as a hegemonic apparatus, identifying global trends that consistently concentrate wealth and power in the hands of corporations and world trade organisations through privatisation, foreign investment schemes, austerity measures, all at the expense of the working classes, stripped of their collective identity and exposed to record unemployment levels and financial inequality. But what is truly astonishing is the level to which this is sold to us: “It has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power, locally, as well as transnationally, but most particularly in the main financial centres of global capitalism” (Harvey, 2005:119). This account of neoliberalism is, however, incomplete without an acknowledgement of how it looks today. Against critics declaring the ‘death of neoliberalism’ after the 2008 recession and the rise of authoritarianism/nationalism, Boffo, Saad-Filho and Fine emphasise its continuing strength and vitality

over 10 years on, suggesting that rather than weakening neoliberal structures, the 2008 recession actually catalysed and sped up the process of the “financialization of production, exchange, and social reproduction, i.e., the subsumption of economic and social reproduction by the intensive and extensive accumulation of interest bearing-capital” (2018:250). To simplify, financialization has become the dominant driver of economic and social restructuring on both a national and global level, leading to a “tendency to short-termism and speculation as opposed to long-term investment in pursuit of productivity” (Boffo et al, 2018:251). Ideologically, neoliberalism is intimately bound to the artifices of postmodernism at the level of rhetoric: the free market is perceived to be an authentic expression of human nature, and in the postmodern, “it is the very idea of the market that is consumed with the most prodigious gratification” (Jameson, 1991:269), and that market ideology assures us that “human beings make a mess of it when they try to control their own destinies” (Jameson, 1991:273). Under these conditions the logic of financialization or ‘finance capital’ is reproduced not only in the economic sphere (as it was in the heady days of pre-war liberalism) but has enlarged to encompass ‘culture’ as a whole, and indeed, our very idea of culture transforms too: no longer an autonomous sphere, culture has expanded throughout the social realm so totally that everything from “economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself” becomes cultural (Jameson, 1991:48). Historian Robert Hewison echoed this sentiment after identifying the treatment of culture as an extension of economic policy, arguing that social relations “are experienced solely through the market”, relegating culture to the commodity form (Hewison, 2014:49). Finance capital is then translated down to the level of subjectivity, reified in new terminology such as “mobility” and “flexibility” enabling a kind of permanent marketisation of the self, required to progress up the social ladder. The neoliberal subject adopts the logic of the market, and thus acts *individually* and *competitively*, as only the individual is allowed to progress meritocratically, therefore obfuscating the function of collective action and producing an absence of solidarity (Littler, 2016:76). The complicity of neoliberalism with postmodernity will be explored in more detail in a later section, for now these comments should suffice an overview.

What needs to be additionally stressed however, is the role of the *state* in the perpetuation of such a system, and perhaps more importantly, how the notion that neoliberalism weakens the state is an ideological fiction *tout court*. As Ahmad puts it, “What globalized neoliberalism wants is a state that is weak in relation to capital and ruthlessly strong in relation to labour” (2018:32). Owen Hatherley observes this system in action with the quasi-governmental institutions responsible for ‘regeneration’ throughout the UK: English Partnerships, for instance, purported to bring business and state together, a relationship in which the latter sponsored the former to such an extent that it would have been cheaper for the state to carry out its ‘regeneration’ projects on its own (2011: xviii). English Partnerships were emblematic of an entire archipelago of almost entirely state-funded private companies known as Arm’s Length Management Organizations on the receiving end of (formerly public) council housing. By 2009, English Partnerships had transformed into the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) in response to the economic crash and launched a programme of house building, with many people expecting social housing to be on their list of priorities in light of how extensive waiting lists had become post-crash. However, the state offered a £1 billion direct cash injection to private developers for “high quality mixed tenure housing developments”, resulting in little more than a “massive programme of public funding for substandard private housing” (Hatherley, 2011: xviii-xix). This narrative is only one aspect of the contemporary ideological and material conditions that birthed the hauntology of Burial and Laura Grace Ford throughout the 2000s and will be explored in more depth later.

As neoliberal structures scramble to prevent any possibility of a return to such an abhorred system as communism, they become all the more susceptible to being haunted by such a system: hegemony “organises the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony” (Derrida, 1994:46). The communist/socialist model has been the most consistent in countering capitalist inequalities, and at a time when more and more evidence demonstrating the systemic fissures of capital are surfacing (Mark Fishers’ account of mental health (2012a) and Franco Berardi’s book *Heroes* (2015), are exemplary in this regard), it seems foolish to suggest that we have

truly reached “the end of history”. However, the difference between the historical context of Derrida’s ‘late capitalism’ of the early 90s and Fisher’s ‘capitalist realism’ of 2009-onwards, is that the latter “has not been haunted by the apparition of the spectre of communism, but by its disappearance” (Fisher, 2014a:19); the Soviet Union was fresh in the minds of the subjects of late capitalism, and so its spectral presence could be felt more strongly. The situation is quite different in our present historical juncture as, expanding on Fisher, Aijaz Ahmad has suggested that the ascendancy of figures such as Donald Trump and the far-right more broadly has been a process steadily garnering support since at least the 1960s, beginning with Barry Goldwater’s bid for the US presidency in 1964, securing the Republican nomination and infamously proclaiming “Extremism in the pursuit of liberty is no vice” in his acceptance speech. This has been compounded with support for the German Neo-Nazi movement, the French National Front and the British National Party throughout and after the post-war period, all of which, Ahmad suggests, is down to the lack of hegemonic opposition to the far-right across Euro-America (2018:35). This is to say – provisionally – that the philosophical debates around Derrida’s hauntology in the 1990s were preoccupied with the ‘spectre of communism’, whereas Fisher’s capitalist realism (and hauntology) is preoccupied with filling that spectre’s disappearance.

Hauntology and its critics (towards a literature review)

Before continuing I want to briefly survey some of the opponents and sceptics of Derrida’s work, which are mostly contained within the pages of *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Spectres of Marx* edited by Michael Sprinker (2008). Antonio Negri’s contribution reminds the reader that thinking in terms of spectres is nothing new to a properly Marxian analysis, and - harking back to the earlier discussion on the spectrality of the money form - Negri elaborates on how this spectre acts upon the subject themselves:

"A spectre is the movement of an abstraction that is materialized and becomes powerful: above all the abstraction of value which, in a bloodless movement, vampirizes all of the worker's labour and, transforming itself into surplus-value, becomes capital; money, secondly, which in a circular movement verticalizes itself and is consolidated into currency, i.e., in finance capital and parasitic potentiality [...] The phenomenology of capitalist production described by Marx in *Capital* demonstrates therefore how, by way of this spectral movement, a true and proper metaphysics of capital is produced, as well as the autonomy of its power." (1999:7)

However, the transparency of this process, Negri contends, no longer holds today when never before has such a diverse paradigm of labour been made available to the parasitic tendrils of capital; he is primarily referring to the proliferation of 'immaterial' or 'cognitive' labour as a consequence of the ongoing deindustrialisation process, i.e. the relocation of industrial production to territories in which the reproduction of labour power is cheaper, leaving the majority of work available to those living in 'developed' countries in the service sector, finance or creative industries. This does not necessarily mean that Derrida's spectral analysis is redundant; on the contrary, the conspiracy against Marxism, the adulation for the free market, the 'timeless' and 'placeless' construction of a global power, the 'end of history', the expansion into our consciousness of a near totalizing media presence, and the "emptying out of the meaning from the word 'democracy' [...] represent only a few of the hegemonic orders of capitalism in one phase of *the spectral reconstruction of the real*" (1999:9, italics mine). The contention is that the *real* truly has become spectral, the workings of exploitation no longer easily identifiable, and Derrida's spectrology is the method by which this is to be identified and combatted. The problem for Negri (and others in this collection), is that it "plays with the spectres of being, rather than proposing an exit towards the future" and that by doing so "it turns back and loses itself in that which is 'inaccessible to man', in the 'infinitely other'" (1999:14). By falling back on pure metaphysics, hauntology, and by extension, all deconstructive practice, becomes a method played out in the realm of mysticism, as well as that more thoroughly reactionary position of theology with Derrida's commitment to the messianic, ungraspable non-being – seemingly vacating the world of politics in favour of solitary transcendence (Negri, 1999:15); and Derrida defines messianism in a dubiously Benjaminian sense: "it refers, in every

here-now, to the coming of an eminently real, concrete event, that is, to the most irreducibly heterogeneous otherness” (1999:248). I understand this to represent a kind of forward thrust into the future; a straining towards some big event with the promise that it will occur, but whose coming cannot be reduced to a spatial/temporal prediction, and therefore for the time being, can only haunt.

Indeed, the messianic is a figure of great importance to Jameson, who in it perceives the spectrality of the future, as opposed to the absolute historicity of the past; the messiah thus represents for Derrida and co, the faith that must be maintained in the future if the apocalyptic ‘end of history’ is to be resisted, for the apocalyptic can only spell “the end of spectrality” (Jameson, 1995:64). This particular ‘end’ is categorically undesirable for Jameson as “a world cleansed of spectrality is precisely ontology itself, a world of pure presence, of immediate density, of things without a past; [...] an impossible and noxious nostalgia” (1995:58), which is exactly the kind of world that Fukuyama’s neoconservatism seems to pine for; a world that has so triumphantly exorcised its unwanted spectres and ghosts so that late capitalism might lay claim to ontology itself; uncontested in both the material world and the spectral: entirely synonymous with Being. Yet this still seems far too theoretical to be of any practical use, as Negri contended before (if not at least an eloquent diagnoses of the problem), and Jameson seems to acknowledge this in some ambiguous concluding remarks:

“So it is that Marxism and its current spectrality, which not so unexpectedly intersected the weak messianic impulses of our own period, now both emerge in some post-semiotic universe of messages and into the virtualities of the new communications technologies: original forms of hesitation, a new kind of trembling or shimmering of the present in which new ghosts now seem on the point of walking.” (1995:65)

What this indicates to myself is an uncomfortable mutation of Marxist thinking during a period of rapid technological change: how can such a totalizing theory originally equipped for the material world map and explain an increasingly spectral one? The implied starting point being the need to nurture its “weak messianic” mode. Nonetheless, Jameson’s remarks are quite prophetic in announcing the spectrality of the

“new communications technologies”, a subject dealt with in the haunted aesthetic of Vaporwave, to be explored later in part two.

And what of the fate of a Marxism that refuses to adapt? Montag suggests that a “Marxism inseparable from its material forms, a Marxism without a transcendental promise or spirit, is dead, a body that has given up the ghost, or rather a body whose spirit has suffered that death beyond death, the death that survives life after death” (1999:78). Marxism must therefore become a spirit/spectre itself in order to find liberation from itself, and here it seems appropriate to differentiate between the “spirit” and the “spectre”: the latter should be understood phenomenologically as having a certain carnal form through which the former will speak; as by its very nature the spirit is incorporeal and must have a vessel providing materiality to its voice. This is of course a paradox in the sense that the spirit “produces effects only by taking a material form”, and the spirit must exist before it can be embodied in new material forms: “In this way, the spirit or a spirit of Marxism, that is, one of its promises, will survive the parties, unions and mass organizations, all the practical forms that Marxism has so far taken, one day, in the future to be realized in new, perhaps better forms” (Montag, 1999:77). This is a radical position: to die in order to be reborn anew; and Both Terry Eagleton and Aijaz Ahmad take great umbrage at Derrida for even suggesting that the history of Marxism, of socialism, communism, of the class struggle in general must be declared dead and buried for such a rebirth to occur; although as Macherey comes to remind the reader, following the spirit of Marx and to obey its injunctions, “is not to repeat its formula mechanically, as if it were already finished; but it is actively to reaffirm its significance, for the latter must be produced or reproduced anew from the perspective of an interpretation which reveals what remains living in it” (1999:19). Such circular debates do not produce a satisfactory answer though, and still remain firmly in the metaphysical register; perhaps outright rejection of deconstruction and hauntology will shed some more light on how a rigorous dissenting politics can be maintained at the end of history.

Returning to Eagleton and Ahmad, there has been the accusation that Derrida has become a victim of an academicist fantasy, and that he has thus mistaken his position with that of an “enlightened

anti-Stalinism”, and that the truth “is that he is hardly concerned with an effective socialism at all.

Deconstruction, with all its preoccupation with slippage, failure, aporia, incoherence, not-quitiness, its suspicion of the achieved, integral or controlling, is a kind of intellectual equivalent of a vaguely leftist commitment to the underdog" (Eagleton, 1995:86). This is most evident in the pages of *Specters of Marx* where Derrida betrays his commitment to praxis by emphasising such impotent solutions as

“A ‘New International’, one 'without status, without title, and without name... without party, without country, without national community...!' And, of course, as one gathers elsewhere in the book, without organisation, without ontology, without method, without apparatus. It is the ultimate poststructuralist fantasy: an opposition without anything as distastefully systemic or drably 'orthodox' as an opposition, a dissent beyond all formulable discourse, a promise which would betray itself in the act of fulfilment, a perpetual excited openness to the Messiah who had better not let us down by doing anything as determinate as coming." (Eagleton, 1995:87)

Such a polemic would seem to lay the previously circular arguments to rest, but there is another dimension in need of address beyond that of simply pointing to post-structuralisms insipid surface. The fault at the heart of Derrida’s refusal to engage with class politics and the denunciation of its history is in fact no more than a misidentification of the *process* behind the global ascendancy of Western liberal democracy. Ahmad has argued that Derrida has failed to recognise that “the defeat of communism and the global triumph of the most brutal kind of capitalism, the disorganisation of labour movements and the rise of Fascisms across Europe, are parts of a single process” (1994:96), which are better combated more directly, instead of the deconstructive ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ which only defer action. This position is compounded by Tom Lewis, also perceiving Derrida’s views on direct action to be hopelessly metaphysical; all attempts to actualize an egalitarian political order within material society are doomed from the first instance if the “Impossibility of Being” is taken for granted (1999:146). The general consensus from Eagleton, Ahmad and Lewis, seems to be that hauntology, and deconstruction more generally, are incapable of answering the political demands of the left at the time:

"Our present time may indeed be 'out of joint', but it is not so because of bad metaphysics. Greater instability in an already crisis-prone system, deepening anger among the world's exploited and oppressed, and sharper divisions both within and among national and international ruling classes - these developments make our time one in which classical Marxism and its tradition of revolution from below have much more to offer than hauntology does in the international struggle for a democratic socialist society." (Lewis, 1999:160)

I will make one final point before bringing this discussion to a close. Ahmad claimed somewhat indirectly to suggest that Derrida's development and maintenance of Deconstruction as an *alternative* to both Marxism and Conservatism has unwittingly contributed to the resurgence of a "fully fledged right-wing intelligentsia" (1994:98), implying that had deconstruction not been weaponised against political Marxism by so many pragmatic liberalist thinkers and philosophers, the 'Spirit of Marx' might have not needed invoking at all. To Ahmad's credit however, he does acknowledge that "deconstruction has been too much an affair of narrow academic confines to have contributed greatly to the triumph of global capitalism" (1994:98). And it is this point that brings me to a critique of my own, one that should help to more firmly establish the link between the theoretical debates discussed above and the cultural manifestation of these debates in hauntology proper. Following the thought of Edward Said, there is an overwhelming tendency for theory to only exacerbate its distance from practice; and this may not be quite so true today but certainly had more purchase during the hauntology debates of the 1990s. When Ahmad says that deconstruction "has been too much an affair of narrow academic confines", he is affirming the pejorative role often assigned to scholarship (the humanities) in general as one that does not interfere with the affairs of the real world, but remains a conversation between academics. In the words of Said: "Eagleton, Jameson [...] are literary Marxists who write for literary Marxists, who are in cloistral seclusion from the inhospitable world of real politics. Both "literature" and "Marxism" are thereby confirmed in their apolitical content and methodology: literary criticism is still "only" literary criticism. Marxism only Marxism, and politics is mainly what the literary critic talks about longingly and hopelessly" (1982:149). If this argument is to be endorsed, then hauntology truly seems a far cry from any kind of transformative politics; however, the fact that it returned (or even came back to haunt?) in a

consumable form in the 2000s would indicate that there is a genuine link between the theory and practice of hauntology. I would like to argue then, *that hauntological culture is a grounding of its theoretical predecessors into lived experience, but with a new clarity of purpose to Derrida's clumsy formulations: the revival of a class politics and the study of a specific cultural phenomenon native to the postmodern condition: stasis.*

Postmodernity and the Slow Cancellation of the Future

Now, the most salient principle in the hauntology discourse in the 2000s is what Fisher and Franco 'Bifo' Berardi both describe as the 'slow cancellation of the future'. When dealing with the concept of the future in this nature, Berardi in his book *After the Future*, does not define it as the forward direction of time, rather, "of the psychological perception, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity, the cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilisation, reaching a peak after the second world war". He goes on to suggest several characteristics of what these cultural expectations were based upon: the Hegelian-Marxist mythological developments in the founding of the "totality of communism"; the bourgeois mythology of linear development in terms of welfare and democracy; and the technocratic mythology of the supremacy to be found within scientific and technological developments (2011:18). The early 20th century was characterised by a brilliant faith in what the future would bring: the Italian Futurists embraced the power of technology in propelling us towards utopia; the Russian Futurists embraced experimental literature and art, calling for total destruction of all things belonging to the past, but much more will be said about this in the next section. The period of 'cancellation' began in 1979 (at least in Britain) with Margaret Thatcher's government bringing an end to "uneasy compromises" of the post-war social consensus. Her neoliberal political programme synergised with the "transnational restructuring of the capitalist economy", namely: post-Fordism, globalisation, ubiquitous computerisation and the casualisation of labour, only intensified in the present day. All of this resulted in a complete transformation of how we structure our work and leisure

time, which has only been aggravated by the seamless presence of mobile telecommunications technology throughout the texture of our everyday experiences (Fisher, 2014a:9). Hauntology is preoccupied with this ‘cancellation’ of the future; whatever is cancelled is transformed into a spectre, approaching from both the past and future; visitations of past failures and tomorrows unfulfilled promises – not dissimilar to the sentiment expressed by Adorno and Horkheimer when they wrote that “The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past”, with hauntologies’ addition of the future (1997:xv). But how do we *know* that the future has failed us? and is there any evidence to be found in the popular culture of post-1979? Two further questions: has culture lost the ability to articulate the present? or is there no longer a ‘present’ to be articulated anymore? Fortunately, postmodern theory, and the work of Fredric Jameson in particular, have addressed these questions in great depth.

Postmodernism is a term replete with contradictions and meanings that are never fixed and far from uncontested, so I will try to confine my discussion to addressing the questions just presented, hopefully without leaving too much to be desired. To venture a provisional definition, Jameson holds that postmodernism is “a periodising concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order” (1985:113). Postmodernity (the term designating the “period” of postmodernism as a stylistic cultural dominant) is dated from the late 1940s and 1950s with the 1960s being the key transitional phase into its domination. It is my own contention that we are still living through this period, as even though many of its stylistic qualities have come to pass there remains a general intensification of its political-socio-economic aspects more commonly associated with “neoliberalism” today, yet as they remain constant with the original descriptions, I see no reason to pronounce a radical departure from it, only that neoliberalism and postmodernism be acknowledged as two parts of the same process. And once again, Jameson summarised this position best:

“The point is that we are within the culture of postmodernism to the point where its facile repudiation is as impossible as any equally facile celebration of it is complacent and corrupt. Ideological judgement on postmodernism today necessarily implies [...] a judgment on ourselves as well as our artefacts.” (1991:62)

The implication that postmodernism is essentially *lived experience*, and that it is the *cultural logic of late capitalism*, is key to understanding the critical force of hauntology, that to be critical of postmodernism is to conduct a sober analysis of our material conditions of existence; this is ideology in the Althusserian sense discussed earlier. Further, it is worth mentioning that this conception of postmodernism is to be juxtaposed to an understanding such as Linda Hutcheon’s, who sees it as one style or genre among many. Indeed, her main thesis concerns postmodernism-as-critique; that its “distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale ‘nudging’ commitment to doubleness or duplicity” (2002:1), and that postmodernism must always critique otherwise it ceases to be postmodern (2002:10). This may have been a realistic thesis when first published in 1989 yet the relentless ‘nudging’ of postmodernism over the past 30-40 years has rendered any critique it once possessed impotent. Fisher wrote about the effect this representational strategy had on British satire, particularly the “generalised sniggering” of a show like *Have I Got News For You*, and importantly, that once upon a time (-1950s) satire could have posed a genuine threat to political authority that expected “unthinking deference” from the electorate (2015). Today, the ridicule of politicians has been routinised to the extent of normalisation, where a ubiquitous “weary cynicism” becomes the habitual response of viewers as well as the “4th estate” journalists responsible for holding them to account: Ian Hislop is a prime example of this development, whose “mock-in-chief persona” seems “grotesquely out of kilter with the kind of systemic corruption that we now know has occurred over the last thirty years” (Fisher, 2015). In short, satire has become an establishment defence mechanism, naturalising figures such as Boris Johnson (occasional host of *HIGNFY*), estranging his Etonian-Bullingdon heritage whilst bolstering his carefully mediated persona of the “lovable, self-mocking buffoon.” As architectural critic Douglas Murphy observes, Johnson’s many appearances on the show since 1998, “entertained everyone as a stuttering, self-deprecating, eccentric toff, willing to sit there

looking impishly bemused as everyone roared with laughter at his apparent lack of comprehension” (2017:9), helping to cement Johnson’s place within the celebrity economy of ‘Cool Britannia’.

Out of the ashes of satire emerges pastiche, the undead twin. This postmodern doppelganger, Jameson has argued (in similar fashion to Edward Said’s criticism of the compartmentalization, increasing specialism and “cloistral seclusion” of interests and academic disciplines), is the result of a breakdown in communicative norms in which each societal group comes to “speak a curious private language of its own”, the consequences of which have each individual coming to represent “a kind of linguistic island” separated from everyone else (1998:5). Without a clear sense of a universal “norm” to compare itself, pastiche flounders where satire once thrived. It is, like parody (or satire), “the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive” (Jameson, 1998:5). *Have I Got News For You* fits this description of pastiche with a certain qualification: the cheerful mockery of MPs and influential figures are the result of a breakdown in the public’s expectation of the consequences of scandal; that there will be no repercussions no longer surprises anyone, and the bankers bailouts after 2008 is perhaps the inaugurating moment for this pervasive cynicism. All one can do is sit and watch as those in power effectively do what they like, meanwhile reducing politics to little more than a consumer’s choice among commodities. In this sense, the new universal “norm” or linguistic centre that pastiche relies upon is indeed the pervasive cynicism of Capitalist Realism, further testifying not to Hutcheon’s generic postmodernism, but to Jameson’s ontological postmodernism. As a postscript to this discussion, it is probably worth considering the relationship of hauntology to the logic of pastiche. Hauntology certainly is a niche practice, “another micro-genre to be a fixture on the more recondite music festival circuit” (Hatherley, 2017:32), which is assuredly true of the music produced under the Ghost Box label; their style and reference points too easily replicable - British horror films, modernist book covers and architecture, pre-1979 public service television broadcasts – but parodic mimicry is not the objective. Their function, rather, is to *estrangle* the past and present as opposed to simply imitating or distorting it. I am in

agreement with Hatherley that the work produced under the Ghost Box label is only partly successful in this regard as it fixates on and pursues a particular style rather than developing any explicit political content, ultimately boiling down to revivalism and reverential whimsy. This should help to explain my rationale for selecting Burial and Laura Grace Ford as case studies over the more conventional candidates associated with Ghost Box.

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this section: It is Jameson's contention that today we are unable to focus our own present, as if "we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience", and continues, "if that is so, then it is a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself – or, at the very least, an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history" (1998:9). This condition is perhaps most evident in what Jameson terms the 'nostalgia mode' or, *la mode rétro* (retrospective styling), in which cultural production increasingly looks to the past for its aesthetic representations, including form, narrative and structure, inevitably leading to a paucity of resources to draw upon when representing the present moment (1988:7). Two examples Jameson draws upon to illustrate this phenomenon are George Lucas' *American Graffiti* (1973) and the later *Star Wars* trilogy beginning in 1977. The first of these films is more immediately paradigmatic of the nostalgia mode in its attempt to completely reconstruct the 1950s in its "lived totality", that is, a faithful reconstruction of all the stylistic peculiarities that distinguish the 1950s from any other historical period, a purely nostalgic yearning to relive, (re)experience and breathe the very air of a by-gone era. *Star Wars*, on the other hand, is evidently not an attempt to periodise in the same way that *American Graffiti* does, rather, Jameson suggests, it reinvents the "Saturday afternoon serial of the Buck Rogers type – alien villains, true American heroes, heroines in distress..." experienced by the generation growing up in the 1930s-1950s (1988:8). This is a *formal* nostalgia, an attachment to a certain narrative structure that only appears new by virtue of its use of SFX and new technology that obscure its archaic form.

A short detour through the workings of nostalgia might help to better differentiate between the kind of nostalgia endemic to postmodernism to that of hauntology. The word Nostalgia comes from the 17th century and was used to describe the condition of Swiss mercenaries on long tours of military duty; a condition of homesickness and a despondent longing to return to their native lands. They would be afflicted with melancholy, anorexia, and in some cases became suicidal. This psychosomatic affect was only attended to by military doctors concerned with how it would impact company morale and was not recognised elsewhere until the 19th century. What Simon Reynolds has emphasised through an etymological investigation of nostalgia is the application of the word to distance and space; the need to return to a physically existing place, rather than a time; “an ache of displacement” (2011: XXV). The modern sense of the word after its de-medicalisation was therefore incurable; if a trip back to the homeland could have solved it, then only travelling back in time could solve the issue now. No longer recognised as a pathology, it could be applied to individuals wishing to return to a simpler, happier period in their lives, or even whole societies longing for stability or a return to social order. The latter can concern both conservative or reactionary notions around a predilection for a more rigid class structure and imperialist economics, as well as leftist ideals of radical movements that failed to truly achieve lasting change yet had a perceived euphoric energy to be ignited once again. But this is still too general.

The type of nostalgia identified by Jameson is to be sharply distinguished from the psychological nostalgia evoked by the quintessentially modernist writers such as James Joyce and Marcel Proust, who according to Mark Fisher, were the only “figures capable of exhibiting and expressing a yearning for the past” as they still experienced a strong sense of historical time (2014a:11). An example will be instructive: James Joyce’s 1916 novel *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man* traces the virtues and iniquities of the experience of growing up in Ireland. Written semi-autobiographically, Joyce is able to reflect nostalgically on his childhood and teenage years whilst acknowledging the myriad problems accompanying it, eventually coming to renounce Ireland in favour of new horizons. Joyce’s protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, has a keen sense of historical time: “The past is consumed in the present and the present

is living only because it brings forth the future” (2016:233). Evidently, Dedalus firmly believes in the categories “past”, “present” and “future”, even affirming that they are to be understood in dialectical fashion as constantly interfacing with one another, shaping our perceptions of each category in a dynamic and historicising manner. Yet his ultimate rejection of the past (both spatially and temporally following the author’s moving to Paris) reveals his faith in an as yet unwritten future: “Not this. Not at all. I desire to press in my arms the loveliness which has not yet come into the world” (2016:233). It is this absolute trust in the future, with a firm but (not always) sensitive rejection of the past that characterises the modernist conception of nostalgia. As Karl Ove Knausgaard writes in the novel’s introduction, “His art is new and free. It has undergone the process of decolonizing itself from the history by which the Irish have been made. It is [...] an act of freedom that lifts the historical aloft into a new region” (2016: xlv). It is the great postmodern contention that no such history is available today that can instil a confidence in the future. And so, the ‘nostalgia mode’ emerges once historical time ceases to make sense, otherwise referred to as the ‘crisis of historicity’ (Jameson, 1991:25), when the individual (bourgeois subject) becomes ‘fragmented’, experiencing time ‘schizophrenically’:

“If we are unable to unify the past, present and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. With the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (Jameson, 1991:27)

This analysis is based off of syntactic trends found in postmodern fiction by which writing appears temporally confused, with characters unable to situate themselves in a stable time and space. Jameson has suggested elsewhere that the schizophrenic could also be a product of the realisation that not only is the bourgeois individual a thing of the past, but that it never existed in the first place; that it was only ever a “philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade people that they “had” individual subjects and possessed a unique identity” (1985:115). Regardless of its origins, the crisis of historicity

and the rise of the schizophrenic subject render the concept of postmodernism, and as will be demonstrated shortly, hauntology, much more intelligible.

But this necessitates one final remark on the dominant form of nostalgia today: ‘retromania’. Before providing a definition, I consider Cool Britannia to be the inaugurating moment of this phenomenon in the UK with its nostalgic replay of the “excitement that had greeted the emergence of a hedonistic pop culture as ‘Swinging London’ thirty years before.” Notably, nineties Britpop spearheaded this movement with Oasis and Blur hailing a return to the “glory days of the Beatles” while the Union Jack once again became an ironic symbol for a pop-cultural patriotism (Hewison, 2014:35). Cool Britannia quickly became a political creation after Tony Blair appropriated it for New Labour’s rebranding of the national identity, walking into Downing Street with a Fender guitar and publicly fraternising with Noel Gallagher (Hewison, 2014:36). The following decade would see this kind of nostalgia bleed into every pore of popular culture, which Simon Reynolds termed ‘retromania’. This denotes the ubiquitous nostalgia that has become an almost required, formal feature of popular culture today. All that is ‘retro’ occupies the space in which popular culture and personal memory converge; it concerns (1) the relatively immediate past, but most importantly whatever is still in living memory; (2) a degree of exact recall by way of documentation or archival sources, enabling precise replication of such material; (3) specifically *pop cultural* artifacts, not the unique collectibles of an antiquated ‘high culture’; (4) and lastly, it should not idealise or sentimentalise the past but repackage it in such a way as to generate a certain charm or amusement, a playfulness that estranges and isolates historical memory, revealing much more about the present and its relationship to the past rather than any meaningful engagement with the past itself (Reynolds, 2011:xxx). Simply put it could be described as the *absolute* commodification of the past. The past no longer becomes recognisable or accessible as so much meaningful and tumultuous change when all that is celebrated are the residues of commodity culture. This is what hauntology-as-genre responds to at the most immediate level, and that both proliferated during first decade of the 2000s is appropriate. Reynolds:

“Instead of being the threshold to the future, the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the ‘Re’ Decade. The 2000s were dominated by the ‘re-’ prefix: *revivals*, *reissues*, *remakes*, *re-enactments*. Endless *retrospection*: every year brought a fresh spate of anniversaries, with their attendant glut of biographies, memories, rockumentaries, biopics and commemorative issues of magazines. [...] But the 2000s was also the decade of rampant *recycling*: bygone genres *revived* and *renovated*, vintage sonic material *reprocessed* and *recombined*. Too often with new young bands, beneath their taut skin and rosy cheeks you could detect the sagging grey flesh of old ideas.” (2011: xi)

What this polemical description of the 2000s demonstrates and dramatizes is the impact of digital technologies on cultural memory; specifically, the internet and its power to democratise and render accessible what was once in limited supply in the material world (what is sometimes referred to as the ‘technological uncanny’ – the instantaneous retrievability of archived material for manipulation and nostalgia, with all the attendant dichotomies between the seamless production technologies of the now against the analogue defects of the past (Coverley, 2016:12)). All of these cultural artefacts can now be distributed on a global scale, streamed, broadcast on television, made available for download, whilst still being available off the shelf. The 21st centuries’ obsessive curating of the past is neatly summarised by Coverley as a “symptomatic yet futile attempt to control time which has only intensified as new technologies become a facilitator for nostalgia, providing instantaneous access to endless new swathes of the past” (2020:231). Indeed, the inaugurating decade was never characterised by modernity’s archetypal quest for newness, but by a torrent of contradictory nostalgias: nostalgic cyberpunks, rockers, hippies, nationalists, cosmopolitans, environmentalists, metrophiliacs (city lovers) and many more (Boym quoted in Coverley, 2020:233). Svetlana Boym couldn’t have been cannier in remarking that the 20th century “began with utopia and ended with nostalgia”, and that, she continues, “optimistic belief in the future became outmoded, while nostalgia, for better or for worse, never went out of fashion, remaining uncannily contemporary” (quoted in Coverley, 2020:232). Nostalgia, it could be argued, was once merely a cultural tendency, whereas today as then in the 2000s, it is so ubiquitous as to have become unremarkable, and again, one of the key differences between hauntology and the nostalgia mode is that

Fisher described a cultural landscape that had entirely succumb to the symptoms first identified by Jameson; hauntology declares nostalgia to be a *mediated* lived experience, perhaps even a new ontology altogether. But this suggests that nostalgia may no longer be possible: if there is no longer any real sense of a present then how can nostalgia persist as anything other than a corporate pastiche? Hauntology acknowledges a period of ‘post-nostalgia’ that has only occurred due to a lack of anything to measure nostalgia against, and thus the present cannot be experienced as anything other than the sum of its pasts (Coverley, 2020:13).

To take a contemporary example, Steven Spielberg’s *Ready Player One* (2018) takes place in the year 2045, but in its key moments presents an amalgamation of past pop cultural icons in a sublime visual feast of free-floating signifiers; the iconic DeLorean from *Back to the Future* (1985), the monster from *Godzilla* (1998), The Overlook Hotel from *The Shining* (1980), the robot from *The Iron Giant* (1999) and many more. I use the expression “free-floating signifiers” as each of these representations has been abstracted from its original context to be used and abused by the characters in *Ready Player One*’s diegesis; decontextualised in this way they have been deprived of a referent, recycled and celebrated as forms that satisfy an aesthetic longing assumed to be held by the audience. The past – that is, the pop cultural icons of the past – has been firmly bracketed off from the films present, and this becomes even more pertinent when this past can only be experienced within the VR world of OASIS. To paraphrase Jameson, it is a terrible indictment of the film if it could not function without these anachronisms, that they were absolutely necessary to create a sufficient amount of hype to become profitable. To be clear, *Ready Player One* is not an example of hauntology, but it is ‘hauntological’ in the sense that it so perfectly evokes the cultural malady that hauntology seeks to critique. What *Ready Player One* is a shining example of, however, is the new spatial and temporal logic of postmodernism and its attendant simulacrum(s). Under the postmodern rubric the past, as Jameson argues, is hereby modified: “what was once, in the historical novel as Lukacs defines it, the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective project

[...] has meanwhile itself become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum”
(1991:18).

Notes towards a method

Terry Eagleton has noted the peculiar feature of words that end in ‘-ology’; they mean to designate a science or study of a given phenomenon, yet this definition is often inverted when ‘ology’ words “end up meaning the phenomenon studied rather than the systematic knowledge of it” (2007:63). Hauntology is not much different as, for Derrida, it is a “science of ghosts”; an alternative metaphysical framework for studying being and non-being – never intending for it to become a descriptor of so much cultural practice; yet this is precisely how hauntology is understood by most today, as a genre all on its own. Proposing a dialectical solution, Matt Colquhoun suggests that instead of rendering hauntology “hauntographically” (which for Deleuze can be reduced to the elementary functions of ordering and describing), understood as “a description of the repetitive semiology of capitalist modernity”, it should be seen as “a study of its innate nature and its effect on us as subjects” (2020:33). In trying to avoid this “repetitive semiology of capitalist modernity” – though necessarily retaining it as a conceptual base – my own method, as should be clear by now, is rooted in a historical narrative, seeking to restore politics to the surface of the text, whilst taking stock of the impact this has on the subject.

In taking great inspiration from Fredric Jameson’s pathbreaking *The Political Unconscious* (first appearing in 1981), my own method will take seriously his notorious axiom ‘Always Historicise!’, and that this must necessarily take place within a Marxist framework. The key to understanding not just history in all its grandeur and infinite complexity, but developing a genuine ‘cognitive map’ (essentially class consciousness of a broader, more global kind (Jameson, 1991:416-418)) of the present ‘totality’ (world system) in the process, is the resumption of seeing the ‘human adventure’ as a single process. Jameson summaries thus:

"These matters can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic a form, they are seen as sharing a single fundamental theme - for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity; only if they are grasped as episodes in a single vast unfinished plot [...] It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in

restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious funds its function and its necessity." (2002:3)

Situating a text within this narrative - even if it is not immediately evident that it belongs to such a narrative – is paramount to Jameson’s process, allowing history to be seen as operating within the text as well as a force bearing down upon it. However, there is one immediate problem in need of address when applying this method to hauntology specifically: that the theme of class struggle is not alien to much of the material under analysis. This is not so much a political *unconscious* as a very *conscious* attempt at foregrounding the class struggle, but this need not alter the framework in any significant way as it makes for a remarkably clear reading of the history enriching the text. This applies more to the initial case studies of Burial’s sonic hauntology and Laura Grace Ford’s artistic representations in *Savage Messiah*. Analysing vaporwave presents more of a challenge to the Marxist hermeneutic, but it is worth remembering that the ‘political unconscious’ is a *rival* hermeneutic strategy not in service of refuting other more specialist hermeneutics, but in recognising their limitations and prioritising the Marxist interpretive method, therefore the search for ‘historicity’ can quite easily coexist with conventional semiotic strategies that isolate individual formal, structural or aesthetic elements of a text.

One of the immediate methodical dispositions this framework forces us to adopt is the rejection of any assumption that a text ‘reflects’ certain values. This implies only a surface level critique, conferring a sense of passivity on the text as opposed to seeing it as an actively ideological creation. Instead, it is far more useful to begin by assuming that the text *embodies* those values; that they are internalised from its very inception; that all the ideological, political, historical, social, economic values of a given period are staged by the text – consciously or unconsciously – in an attempt to provide an “imaginary resolution” to real societal contradictions (a very similar formulation to Althusser’s definition of ideology). Jameson summarises thus:

"the relationship between art and its social context can be freed from inert conceptions of reflection by the proposition that the social context [...] is to be grasped as the *situation* - the problem, the dilemma, the contradiction,

the 'question' - to which the work of art comes as an imaginary solution, resolution or 'answer'" (Jameson cited in Wayne, 2003:142)

My thesis is that this process is both consciously and unconsciously undertaken by many artists working in the genre of hauntology. For instance, in *Savage Messiah*, Laura Grace Ford reveals the antagonistic history suffered by the working classes in now gentrified areas of London and other urban landscapes by transforming them into hostile atmospheres of decay and dereliction. This is the “imaginary resolution” – the restoration of a forgotten history running counter to neoliberalism’s narrative of urban “regeneration”. A similar process is at work in all the glitches, distortions and inorganic impositions that the vaporwave genre thrives upon; they alert the listener to the emptiness of the global capitalist aesthetic, completely estranging familiar environments like the artificial plazas found in American shopping malls. Additionally, implicit within this method is the rejection of any assertion that art and culture occupy a space separate and distinct from the social. This is usually invoked to reinforce the idea that the distance between culture and the social allows the former more critical purchase on the latter; yet as Jameson has argued, that very distance would surely doom its “interventions to ineffectuality and relegates art and culture to a frivolous, trivialized space in which such intersections are neutralized in advance” (2007: xv). I will therefore maintain that understanding hauntology as a practice rooted firmly within the culture of neoliberalism – and not separate from it – is key to evaluating its critical force.

As the introduction will have suggested more broadly, the hauntology under the microscope throughout this paper is the product of a very specific set of historical conditions and cultural expectations – post-war optimism, Fisher’s ‘popular modernism’, the wave of neoliberal reforms in the 1980s etc. – that has produced a necessarily *genealogical* approach, forming the contextual base for the study. Lorna Finlayson defines this approach to analysis as “the unearthing of multiple and contingent roots of what may present itself as a necessary unity” (2020:140). Jameson, too, sees its merits in relation to the ‘political unconscious’ as “elements of the past can "artificially" be isolated as objective preconditions”, constructing not a historical narrative per se, but by essentially “renewing our perception of the synchronic system as in

an X-ray, its diachronic perspectives serving to make perceptible the articulation of the functional elements of a given system in the present" (2002:126). To unpack these definitions and take them together, the present historical conjuncture (neoliberalism; Capitalist Realism) needs to be explained and situated within a historical narrative. This is what Jameson means when referring to the renewal of the synchronic (the present, or a fixed point in time) through the diachronic (change over time). Their reconciliation constitutes the "necessary unity" of Finlayson's genealogy. The genealogical approach complements the Marxian political unconscious by giving credence to its interpretations. This method is of course closely related to ideology critique – the tracing of ideas back to relations of power - which could be seen as being in tension with genealogical analysis by further abstracting relations of power throughout history, however, I would argue that ultimately, ideology critique is not in tension with either of these methods, and can be said to have been subsumed more broadly within the Marxian approach. Indeed, Finlayson holds that genealogy reveals its object of study (in this case hauntology) to be an "arbitrary, contingent conglomeration of disparate elements", that are in fact, she continues, far from random as "It is no accident [...] that it is *this* accidental formation and not *that* which establishes itself in and through the institutions of scholarship or media or formal politics" (2020:140). In other words, understanding hauntology by constructing a genealogy will remove the ideological smokescreen perpetuated by ahistorical understandings of neoliberalism; hauntology thus becomes a useful tool for better understanding the present. Terry Eagleton summarised the necessity for theory to be used in this way, arguing that theory "does not emerge at just any historical moment; it comes into being when it is possible and necessary, when the traditional rationales for a social and intellectual practice have broken down and new forms of legitimization for it are needed" (2005:90) (there is an amusing irony in citing Eagleton considering he was one of hauntologies' more vitriolic critics).

I hope that this will go some way towards explaining the slightly meandering historical narratives constructed throughout the previous sections, but it is important to grasp that hauntology does not exist in a political or historical vacuum; it is instead a response to a specific societal formation of postmodern

economics and rampant nostalgia; of urban regeneration, gentrification and population displacement; of recession, stagnating wages and innumerable factors contributing to the growing anomie and inequality of all modern (mostly Western) societies. As Jameson says, the only effective liberation from the constraints of traditional hermeneutic strategies, “begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is “in the last analysis” political” (2002:5). History is therefore always present within any text, and its representation is always either a synchronic problem - "that of the status of an individual "period" in which everything becomes so seamlessly interrelated that we confront either a total system or an idealistic "concept" of a period" - or a diachronic one - "in which history is seen in some "linear" way as the succession of such periods, stages, or moments" (2002:13). Jameson contends that the second is prior to, and always contained within the first, insofar as narrative representations of history always confer significance on an individual period in terms of what came before or afterwards. In this case, neoliberalism - or the period of Capitalist Realism – is the synchronic moment to be explained by its diachronic counterpart in early twentieth century Futurism, mid-late-twentieth century popular modernism, and the last gasp of utopianism in the 1990s. These historical moments are key for Fisher and various other thinkers precisely because of their orientation towards the future and how it might be changed; their avant-garde tendencies poised towards the representation of radically alternative ways of living and being. However, a little more needs to be said on these categories before moving on.

The Century that Trusted in the Future

The most subtly ubiquitous feature of neoliberal hegemony is surely the constraints it imposes upon collective desire and imagination, indeed, that ‘there is no alternative’. That such a dictum should stand in diametrical opposition to the ‘long twentieth century’ in which the utopian imagination flourished alongside grandiose designs on the future, is striking. Franco Berardi in his book *After the Future* described the twentieth century as, “The Century that Trusted in the Future” (2011:12) for good reason. Italian and Russian Futurism became the leading forms through which the utopian imagination would find expression

throughout the early twentieth century, inadvertently “giving birth to the language of commercial advertising” as a by-product (Berardi, 2011:12). Antecedent to the Futurist movement were the often-overlooked Russian Cosmists, epitomized in the works of Nikolai Fedorov who in 1906 could write with single-minded conviction of the ‘common task’ of humanity; a task that would dissolve all past arguments, all trivialities, absorbing aggressions into one task to be shared by all: space travel. Fedorov believed that by mobilising all social energies of the global population towards one end, all conflict could be ended: “The collective mind of all humans working for many generations together would of course be vast enough – all that is needed is concord, multi-unity” (1906:90). Such collective desire seems impossible today after its neutralisation by neoliberal individuality. Fedorov’s rhetoric is of course a future-oriented position on communalism and egalitarianism in stark contrast to the Tsarist autocracy, but unlike Futurism, was never wielded for political ends. What these images of space flight represented however, were humanity’s eagerness for control over its destiny, unimpeded by the fact that aviation hadn’t even been accomplished yet, dreams of space flight promised “total liberation from the signifiers of the past: social injustice, imperfection, gravity, and ultimately, the Earth” (Siddiqi quoted in Srnicek & Williams, 2016:137). As Srnicek and Williams argue, the “utopian inclinations of the time made sense of the rapidly changing world, gave credence to the belief that humanity could channel history in a rational direction and cultivated anticipations for a future society” (2016:137).

The Futurist movement differed insofar as it lacked much positive content. The Italian Futurists, for instance, were concerned with anything that could be construed as “futuristic”, which tends to “imply the infinite possibilities of progress for which there are always signs in the present” (Humphreys, 1999:9). Despite the voluminous manifesto rhetoric placing emphasis on developing technology, advanced cities, radical modes of transportation and other techno-utopian fantasies, the Futurists rarely chose to represent these ideas in their work; their paintings were mostly preoccupied with horses, dogs, people, and present street life in general. Humphreys suggests that what Marinetti (author of the 1909 *Manifesto of Futurism*) and his peers intended by ‘futurism’ was “as much a rejection of the past as an idolatrous concern with the

portents of the future. [...Futurism] was a highly politicised philosophy of life rooted in their rejection of a host of forces, which they believed were inimical to the growth and modernisation of Italy” (1999:9-10). They insisted upon violence, social upheaval and the rejection of heritage as an antidote to “political, cultural and psychological lethargy” (1999:10). The key motive for Italian Futurism was in resisting the atavistic pull exerted by the past, so that present desires could be better engaged with reality. Moreover, Liam Sprod has suggested that rather than participating in the “growing paroxysm of styles in the age of manifestos”, Futurism fed off of the paroxysm itself, and that this violent and dynamic confrontation would herald the destruction and erasure of history so that the future could grow (2012:12). But with negation there is also *sublation*, and Futurism negated the past so that it might sublimate art “into a new revolutionary praxis that would transform the organisational fabric of everyday life” (Bowler, 1991:765). The consequence of being defined *against* something else naturally results in a specific thematic nucleus: speed. Indeed, Futurism was defined in Filippo Marinetti’s manifesto primarily by its aesthetic value of speed; the new beauty of acceleration away from the bloated corpse of the past: “We are on the extreme promontory of the centuries! What is the use of looking behind at the moment when we must open the mysterious shutters of the impossible?” (Marinetti in Berardi, 2011:20). This dialectical combination of negation/sublation resulted in the naïve fetishism for technology that was not represented so much in Futurist art but abounded in rhetoric. For Berardi, Marinetti’s vision was realised as an inverted utopia, as love of the machine gave way to the overproduction of cars, whose assembly line would take on an alienated form of production as workers became increasingly abstracted from their labour. (Indeed, the rival Vorticist movement in Britain - valuing technological primitivism over fetishism/determinism – was “dedicated to destroying the fiction that this urban, warlike, ultra-industrialised country was a jolly suburban arcadia” (Hatherley, 2008:24), choosing to represent the harshness of the industrial environment through unapologetic rectilinear atrocities.)

Of course, the Futurist movement was more positively charged elsewhere. Vijay Prashad eulogises the “left-wing futurism” (2017:47) of the early Soviets caught up in the optimistic aftermath of

the October Revolution. Under the conditions of a young and radical democracy could the poet Mayakovsky write in 1921: “Comrades, give us a new form of art- an art that will pull the republic out of the mud!” (2015:74), and again in 1926: “And behind us time explodes like a land-mine. To the past we offer only the streaming tresses Of our hair tangled by the wind” (2015:195). Like the Italian Futurists, the Soviets felt that the culture of pre-revolutionary Russia was not adequate to the new age, that it was “saturated with feudal implications, just as the hierarchies of the system produced bodies that were filled with subservience, the hunched soldiers, the head downcast” (Prashad, 2017:45), yet unlike the Italians this was not a reactionary position existing for oppositions sake, rather it was the expression of a new freedom, a new boldness geared towards liberation as opposed to the fetishism of an techno-industrial philosophy. Commenting on the legacy of Italian Futurism, Marshall Berman wrote that “It is a real expansion of human sensibility to be able to experience political upheaval in an aesthetic (musical, painterly) way. On the other hand, what happens to all the people who get swept away in those tides?” (2010:25). Indeed, Marinetti and his ilk identified war in 1914 as “the world’s only hygiene”, a sublime romance of destructive new technologies that would claim the lives of two of its most creative proponents within the first two years of conflict – the painter/sculptor Umberto Boccioni, and architect Antonio Sant’Elia (Berman, 2010:26). The problem with “modernisms in the futurist tradition” as Berman put it, is that when machines and mechanical systems are seen to play the defining role in changing the world, “there is precious little for modern to do except to plug in” (2010:27) – which is certainly true of the Italian and Western variants but far less so with more Eastern varieties that Prashad explores in his book (2017:45). The point of delving into this ‘history of the future’ is to identify periods that had a considerably more optimistic perception of the shape of things to come, exploring the conditions that enabled them to flourish and perhaps why they were more successful in certain places, and more problematic in others. Italian Futurism is admirable for its enthusiasm and faith in attempting to accelerate history, but myopic when it came to actually envisioning the human cost of such fantasies. Russian Futurism, in Prashad’s telling, had a genuinely liberatory potential in which great leaps forward in technology could peacefully coexist and enhance the development of a more egalitarian society. What is

missing today, and what saturates Mark Fisher's writings so completely, is the identification of the *absence* of any of these 'futuristic' movements no matter how positive their content.

Curiously, this deeper history only gets a passing mention in Fisher's writings, perhaps safe in the knowledge that Berardi had already dealt with them in *After the Future* (2011), but he does devote a tremendous space to what he describes as 'popular modernism'. This refers to the avant-garde sensibility found in culture that attempts to represent both mainstream and margin, whilst being fiercely devoted to experimentation and innovation (Colquhoun, 2020:242). One example frequently cited by Fisher is that of the Post-punk movement (approximately 1977-1984), that demanded "difference and self-cancellation; a constant orientation towards the new, and a hostility towards the outmoded, the already-existent, the familiar" and that, he continues, "hostility towards the already-familiar has weakened to the point that it has disappeared. We can't be hostile to the past in the way that post-punk was because we don't now have a sense of the present or the future anymore" (Butt et al, 2016:11). The absence of a temporal confidence was touched upon earlier in the discussion on postmodernism and nostalgia, but what Fisher highlights here is the flattening of cultural time that disables the ability to confidently differentiate between past and future; that post-punk sounded more out of date in 1983 than it does now is telling of how perceptions of past and future as well as expectations for what culture should strive for have changed over the last 40 years. The Post-punk 'vanguard' consisted of bands such as The Jam, The Fall, The Cure, Talking Heads, Joy Division, Gang of Four, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and Wire. Yet popular modernism was not just a musical phenomenon; the fact that theory and philosophy could be found in the pages of *New Musical Express* represented a radically different idea as to who was permitted to read complex ideas (contrast this to the "cloistral seclusion" of theory identified by Edward Said, quoted earlier in the discussion on hauntology and its critics). As Fisher said in 2016:

"In the early 80s, its leading writers were autodidacts who had not gone to university but who were nevertheless steeped in post-structuralist thought and used to flaunt this in the pages of a music newspaper that was

then selling hundreds of thousands of copies. There was a kind of contagion of autodidacticism, and the music press formed part of what was in effect an alternative education system." (Butt et al, 2016:14)

So, popular modernism is a sensibility that traverses culture in its entirety; it is pedagogy as well as entertainment; a fundamentally promethean challenge to “the miserable confines of bourgeois culture” (Fisher, 2014c:107). But there were very specific conditions enabling this movement to thrive. Fisher maintains that the infrastructure holding up popular modernism in the UK was social democracy – which is not to say that it is the *only* imaginable condition, but certainly a requirement in this instance – primarily through the accessibility of funding, both direct and indirect. For instance, university grants and unemployment benefits are cited by Fisher as once being reliable, feasible means of funding popular modernist activity, exemplified by Dexy’s Midnight Runner’s admission that they survived as a group mainly through the welfare state (2014c:112). One of the greatest myths spouted by Neoliberalism is the notion that creativity is not contingent, that it will continue to flourish regardless of material conditions: “The more you deprive people of security, the more creative they’ll be, and if people are comfortable then they don’t produce anything, they will be lazy” (Fisher, 2014c:120) - thus goes the argument replicated by Fisher. For Mark, this only highlights the political salience of popular modernism, as it is an example of a period blessed with relative social security that managed to stimulate much higher levels of popular creativity than today. But of course, the future would not be one of popular modernism, but of what Fisher called conservative populism: “the creative destruction unleashed by the force of business on the one hand, the return to familiar aesthetic and cultural forms on the other” (2012b:18).

One particularly notable aspect of the ‘cancellation of the future’ is the tangible shift from *utopia* to *dystopia* and *disaster* in twentieth century culture. And this shift has only intensified in the twenty-first. The preponderance of nightmarish scenarios from authors such as J.G. Ballard, William Burroughs, Anthony Burgess and Harlan Ellison began in the 1960s and inaugurated a new vogue for dystopic narratives, the most frightful of which is surely the BBC film *Threads* (1985) directed by Mick Jackson, staging the long and short-term effects of a nuclear holocaust in Sheffield, with particular focus on the

working classes. The utterly bleak narrative of *Threads* played upon viewers very real concerns as Cold War tensions remained high, mediated by the thoroughly exaggerated tabloid media landscape; there is no hope or salvation to be found at the end of the film, only despair. Hollywood produced a different breed of disaster films relying more on spectacle and heroism than the documentary-like indifference of *Threads*. The *fin de siècle* obsession with end-of-the-world narratives is brilliantly demonstrated in Adam Curtis' 2016 documentary *HyperNormalisation*, featuring a montage of destruction scenes; the Empire State Building and White House are obliterated by aliens, comets, tsunamis and even planes (all of the films were released prior to the events of 2001); the public cowering below before being engulfed by the carnage. *Godzilla* (1998), *Independence Day* (1996) and *Armageddon* (1998) are just three examples. Post-2001 disaster/dystopia films have never been in short supply either, with *2012* (2009), *Children of Men* (2006), *Snowpiercer* (2013), *The Hunger Games* (2012) and *The Lobster* (2015) all testifying to the narrative that things could be much worse, so why seek an alternative? Interestingly, Mark Fisher positively interpreted the revolutionary narrative of *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013), arguing that by staging the act of revolution as an absolute precondition for change, the film's young audience might adopt a different stance to the widespread pessimism shared by older viewers (2018:228). However, this is an un-Marxian reading, and I find myself in agreement with Franco Berardi that despite the presupposition of revolt, this is only enacted out of desperation and despair, not an organised popular movement of solidarity with real political and material goals. Instead, the film engenders one of the core principles of the neoliberal doctrine: competition. As Berardi writes, the rebellion is "sad and hopeless, whose outcome contradicts any idea of possible solidarity among the oppressed", and that the viewer is "persuaded that *The Hunger Games* describes the world he will inhabit, in which everybody will be obliged to live in the near future [...] In this world, only the winner can survive, and if one wants to win she must eliminate all the others, friends and foes" (2019:45).

The genealogical construction just presented is additionally a counter-narrative to the much too common interpretation that hauntology is simply the result of digital technologies - mostly the internet.

This is essentially the argument put forward by Simon Reynolds in *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (2011). No doubt digital technologies have a dramatic role to play in this narrative – and indeed they are the prime expression of much hauntological music - but they are not the primary cause for our “being-haunted”. As has been stressed throughout this piece, it is the *disappearance* of a strong sense of the future; the *disappearance* of the very conditions amenable to cultivating a sense of the future, and, moreover, the inability to even imagine any alternative that has apprehended our cultural time; and this is as much a political issue as a digital-cultural one. Reynolds reads hauntology as the mourning not of an ideology (Marxism) but of an era, and therefore makes the mistake of interpreting the inertia of mainstream culture as a failure to combat the digital reanimation of the past. This is a mistake precisely because there is scant attention paid to the material conditions that allowed twentieth century culture to develop in the way that it did.

PART TWO

Case Study One: London After the Rave

This section will begin the sustained analysis and deeper consideration of the hauntological dimensions at work within the texts mentioned throughout the introduction. And of course, these analyses will be informed by the historical context and genealogy constructed in previous sections. I have chosen to focus on the music of Burial and the art of Laura Grace Ford as they better represent the repression of 'history', and of class politics central to a more Marxist analysis.

Originally an anonymous moniker, Burial is the recording alias for the South London born dub techno musician William Bevan. Burial's identity was revealed in 2008 after spending three years releasing music under Kode9's electronic music label Hyperdub, with his only two albums, *Burial* (2006) and *Untrue* (2007) appearing within this period. Writing in 2007, Mark Fisher commented upon how difficult it was to categorise Burial's music at the time, as Hyperdub had been a near exclusively dubstep label, yet Burial's music was far too "out of step" to be labelled as such (2014a:101). Burial's music is better understood as a distorted amalgamation of several styles operating within the UK rave scene; namely Jungle, hardcore, 2-step garage, dubstep and techno. However, Fisher stresses that generic consistency or verisimilitude is besides the point, and I use the term "distorted" precisely to avoid any implication that Burial's music is reducible to any of those genres in the same way that postmodernism is often associated with the mixing of genres in a futile quest to create something "new". Instead, what needs to be grasped is the consistency of Burial's "sonic concept" and how this contributes to "articulating the existential malaise of an era and a place using only sampled voices, broken breakbeats and musique concrète sound effects" (Fisher, 2014a:101). This is achieved primarily through the foregrounding of 'materiality', which could be provisionally defined as the representation - or simulation - of analogue sounds, finding its most signature expression in crackle. This sense of materiality is what brings Burial's music out of the postmodern and into the hauntological, as despite relying on sounds and styles popular in the 1990s, any supposed nostalgia for those sounds is a paradoxical one: "The problem is that the electronic sounds produced between the 1950s and the 1990s *remain* sonic signifiers of the

future – and as such, they are signs that the anticipated future never actually arrived” (Fisher, 2013:45). As I have stressed earlier in this piece, hauntology is chiefly performed via the blurring of contemporaneity with elements of the past, foregrounding those past elements to better estrange the present, whereas postmodernism tends to isolate those elements, confining them to an easily identifiable past. This is how Burial’s music is able to rely almost entirely on old sounds yet also appear vaguely new. As Simon Reynolds argues, Burial’s music does hark back to the euphoria of hardcore and early jungle, yet it is filtered through a “misty-eyed prism of loss”, characterised by “fidgety, clacking beats [...], fog bank synths, yearning slivers of vocal and shroud of sampled rainfall and vinyl hiss”, all of which makes it more suited to a “melancholy private reverie than rave-floor action. [It is...] music for abandoned night clubs” (2011:393).

In a particularly lucid review of the 2006 album *Burial*, Fisher noted that the album’s press release described the sound as “near future South London underwater”, but “near future” did not seem like the most pertinent descriptor walking through the damp and drizzly streets of Blair’s London: “it strikes me that the LP is very London Now – which is to say, it suggests a city haunted not only by the past but by lost futures. It seems to me to have less to do with a near future than with the tantalising ache of a future just out of reach” (2014a:98). The sentiment behind Mark’s comments on the kind of feelings evoked by Burial whilst walking through urban environments is elaborated on by Koliolis, suggesting that “aesthetic relationships between the soundscape of a city and its acoustic elaboration can affectively articulate an artistic effort to reproduce the ecology of a city”. Burial has effectively translated a soundscape into what Koliolis terms urban cartographies, “or sound-maps of the city, in which aspects of the city are captured and elaborated to express particular social and political affects” (2015:65). What these very academic remarks point towards is the way in which Burial’s music constructs and relates to the history of the environment in which it was conceived, and this is hardly surprising considering that one of Burial’s primary methods was his so-called ‘Car Test’:

“The Car Test’ started with me boring the fuck out of my mates, trying to play tunes. The car test was ‘do they sound good on the car stereo at night time, driving through London?’ That’s ‘The Car Test.’ Some Detroit tunes have that too, that distance in the tune. The ‘thousand-yard stare’ in the tune.” (Burial interviewed by Clark, 2006)

This was about crafting a sound that had a specific relationship to South London; something that suggested and played upon the forms of 90s jungle, but was simultaneously saturated with reverb, footsteps, the dropping of keys, fragments of conversation, ominous buzzing, the occasional totally discordant and isolated note that all converge to make a “sound map” of the city it was born in. The opening track on *Burial* (2006), ‘Untitled 1’, for instance, is 36 seconds long and consists of a man’s voice speaking in hushed tones against the general busyness of London night life before fading into the crackly effect of a blank section of a vinyl disc, but this quickly becomes indistinguishable from the sound of footsteps, and the listener is left wondering if what is being heard is human or the effect of a technology. Indeed, crackle then becomes the omnipresent background to every track on the album – sampling not only vinyl, but pirate radio and fire crackle - a technique that the artist described as possessing an ultimately mystifying function, that

“crackle sits over my drums, hides the space between them. When I started making music, I could see through it and I was disappointed because it destroyed the mystery for a bit. But when I chuck crackle over it, it hides it under layers, it’s no longer mine. And you get a feel of a real environment” (Burial interviewed by Clark, 2006).

Of course, this effect contributed to Burial’s predilection for a sense of anonymity, bolstering his refusal to ‘be a face’ - as if the music were in effect a found artifact from a different era – something that Mark Fisher described as a resistance “to the conditions of ubiquitous visibility and hyper-clarity imposed by digital culture” (2014a:102), compounded by the artist’s refusal to DJ or play live. But perhaps more importantly, crackle brings to life the hauntological dimension of Burial’s music. Keeping the earlier discussion of postmodernism in mind, Fisher neatly summarises the divide between hauntology and postmodernism as follows:

Modernity was built upon “technologies that made us all ghosts”, and postmodernity could be defined as the succumbing of historical time to the spectral time of recording devices. Postmodern time presupposes ubiquitous recording technology, but postmodernity screens out the spectrality, naturalising the uncanniness of the recording apparatuses. Hauntology restores the uncanniness of recording by making the recorded surface audible again.

(2013:48)

With hauntology, the textual discrepancy that resides in the gulf between the crackly, ‘imperfect’ sample and the rest of the recording is allowed to remain as a ghost. What the listener hears in crackle is the “modern time” that postmodernity has erased. This “metaphysics of crackle” uproots any clear distinction between ontologically consistent categories such as *surface* and *depth*, *background* and *foreground*, *past* and *future*. Time is heard to be “out of joint” (Derrida quoting Shakespeare, 1994:1).

The “metaphysics of crackle” refers to Mark Fisher’s play on Derrida’s “metaphysics of presence”, which declared that meaning could be secured and settled via an anchoring to the body, whereas writing was construed as something inauthentic, deferred, absent (Fisher, 2013:43). As a result, writing was something to be repressed and mistrusted in favour of speech (Derrida’s infamous speech/writing dichotomy) – yet Fisher shifts the focus from speech/writing to embodied presence/recorded revenant; the former belonging to the clear, authentic, authorised *voice*; the latter refers to the recorded fragment or unrefined sample (2013:44). And voice is something that Burial manipulates on almost all his tracks: “I like pitching down female vocals so they sound male, and pitching up male vocals so they sound like a girls singing” (Burial quoted in Fisher, 2014a:105). The track “Distant Lights” on *Burial* accomplishes this estranging quality as fragments of a seemingly male voice fade in and out like echoes from a far away place, shrouded by reverb and delay that bestow an ethereal dimension on the unknown speaker, simply repeating the phrase “Now that I need you”. In addition to this, the surface noise emanating from the ever present crackle unsettles the “illusion of presence” by forcing the listener to consider that what is being heard is a phonographic spectre; and to pursue this effect to its logical extreme, the listener is then confronted with the notion that “presence” is a fiction in the first place, that

not just the past, but the present and the future contain ghosts too; hauntology thus becomes a “coming to terms with the permanence of our (dis)possession, the inevitability of dyschronia” (Fisher, 2013:49). What hauntology accomplishes then, is an alternative to postmodernism’s permanent ‘revivals’ as well as a way of thinking linear history. Yet what remains additionally unsettling is the sense of mourning invoked by Burial’s unique take on hauntology. It seems that what is being mourned is not the death of rave, jungle, hardcore etc., but the very possibility of experiencing loss in the first place: “With ubiquitous recording and playback, nothing escapes, everything can return” (Fisher, 2013:49). As discussed earlier, this is the primary effect of ‘retromania’ – the digitally enabled archive mania catalysing the ‘eternal return’ of every pop-cultural artifact no matter how insignificant.

It needs to be said that Burial’s experience of rave was never first-hand, not once setting foot inside one. Instead, it arrived through his older brother, allowing an “imagined escape from a life of offices, corridors and clocks. An escape, however, that was impossible to fully achieve” (Koliolis, 2015:68). In 2006, when the eponymously titled debut album was released, rave culture had in many ways been totally eradicated. Beginning with the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act which, among other things, significantly increased police powers to clamp down on mass gatherings, rave culture diminished throughout the 1990s before being replaced with ‘club culture’. Koliolis places club culture in stark opposition to rave, identifying an aversion to the “work ethic” in the latter now absent in the former; an absence that club culture filled by capitalising on the new “cultural industries”, transforming rave into “spaces of dancefloor leisure”, usually reserved for weekends and devoid of drugs to avoid disrupting the working week (2015:67). Rave would already have become a ghost of its past by the time Burial discovered it, and his mourning is worth quoting at length:

“Maybe the feeling of the UK in clubs and stuff back then, it wasn’t as artificial, self-aware or created by the internet. It was more rumour, underground folklore. Anyone could go into the night and they had to seek it out. Because you could see it in people, you could see it their eyes. Those Ravers were at the edge of their lives, they weren’t running ahead or falling behind, they were just right there and the tunes meant everything. In the 90s you

could feel that it had been taken away from them. In club culture, it all became like superclubs, magazines, Trance, commercialized. All these designer bars would be trying to be like clubs. It all just got taken. So it just went militant, underground from that point. That era is gone.” (quoted in Fisher, 2014a:103)

Mark’s comment that in 2006, London seemed to be full of “dejected ravers” revisiting former sites of revelry and finding them derelict is apposite here, and his further characterisation of Burial’s music as a “re-dreaming of the past [...] a condensation of relics of abandoned genres into an oneiric montage” (2014a:102) is particularly striking. Burial’s music is thus a work of mourning as it contains a refusal to give up on past forms, genres and the engendered feelings of collective euphoria, implicitly hoping that one day it will return. And this theme has been recently taken up by others, for instance, Carl Neville’s utopian novel *Eminent Domain* (2020) imagined an almost global socialist (yet flawed) future - centring on the People’s Republic of Britain (PRB) – in which rave culture is once again a staple of urban British cultural life, but is now universally accepted with the additional legalisation of all kinds of recreational drugs and stimulants suited for the occasion. Nonetheless, it is important to understand that Burial’s sense of mourning should not just be conceived as a “depressive acceptance of the end of rave culture” (Koliolis, 2015:68), but rather, as an attempt to reorient the ghosts of London’s past towards the future. Fisher argued that Burial craves something that he could never experience first-hand, coming to maturity in its residues, and has therefore attempted to materialise a future that never happened – the problem, however, resides in the fact that Burial “cannot positively characterise what lies beyond” (Fisher, 2014a:108). Interestingly, if one wanted to carry out a psychoanalytical reading of Burial’s entire project, Derrida provided a unique starting point when he defined “burial” as “a reverse birth, return to the womb” (quoted in Salmon, 2020:256) – the obvious implication being that perhaps Burial simply wishes to return to a simpler time, but hauntology, as was argued earlier, is not about nostalgia in any conventional understanding of the term, rather, it is about a nostalgia for lost futures.

Suffice to say, Burial’s music does invoke a more important psychoanalytic category more useful in the context of the political unconscious: the uncanny. Freud attempted to deal with the problem of the

uncanny in his 1919 essay 'The Uncanny', defining it as "that species of frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (1919:124), identifying one of the crucial elements of the uncanny as relating to "nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and estranged from it only through being repressed" (1919:148). Freud uses the German term *unheimlich* (unhomely), inadequately translated into "uncanny" to convey these ideas, as homely/unhomely better represent the familiar/unfamiliar dialectic at work within this concept. Dylan Trigg summarises thus: "things that are assumed present are now witnessed as absent, things hitherto thought to be homely emerge as unhomely, and entities we once thought dead materialize as being quite undead" (2012:28). The parallels with hauntology should be evident in this statement, but before proceeding with how hauntology actually uses and benefits from the uncanny, Trigg's instinct to understand the uncanny as an essentially psychosomatic effect is worth quoting at length:

"[...] the uncanny is to be understood fundamentally as an effect, a felt experience that disturbs the body, resulting in a departure from the everyday. Yet no less a displacement from the everyday, the uncanny simultaneously places us in the midst of the familiar. Here a disturbance occurs: The uncanny refuses to concede to stillness, and instead presents us with something genuinely novel: *an augmented familiarity*, thus (un)familiar to the core (*unheimlich*)" (2012:27)

Indeed, the real power of the uncanny is its ability to bleed into every aspect of daily life; it resists domestication by virtue of its defamiliarization of the familiar. There can be no certainty that what is familiar will retain its *heimlich* qualities. Trigg notes that the actual experience of the uncanny is *not* terror or fright, but apprehension; it is "strange rather than shocking, weird rather than annihilating" (2012:28). It is not captured by the idea that we "enjoy what scares us", but has more in common with a *fascination* with the *outside* (Fisher, 2016:8); what lurks on the fringes of perception. Indeed, the problem with the *actual* uncanny experience is that it is fleeting, a temporary disjuncture we often fail to register in the moment and therefore encounter only belatedly because of its very distance. We then ask ourselves 'what just happened to me?' as we feel a sense of disempowerment over ourselves and our environment.

This is why hauntology is an effective vehicle for ‘the uncanny’. It forces us to register the experience in the moment and for a prolonged period of time. What is merely strange can become shocking when the realisation kicks in. Perhaps this is a faithfully naïve reading of Burial’s music, but it is completely functional when considered within the framework of a political unconscious; that the uncanny can help assemble a ‘cognitive map’ of global capitalism, even trigger a kind of class consciousness that has been repressed after 40 years of neoliberalism. The desired effect follows the listener considering the disappearance of rave; the conditions that allowed it to disappear, as well as the repression of working-class (sub)cultures; the club culture that appeared in its stead; and from there, a consideration of the moribundity of popular culture and ‘retromania’ in the early 21st century. As this discussion moves more onto the nature of the built environment and the haunted urban landscapes under neoliberalism, here would be a fitting place to begin considering the work of Laura Grace Ford.

Savage Messiah is a collection of Laura Grace Ford’s (previously publishing under Laura Oldfield Ford) fanzines of the same title. Originally self-published between 2005-2009, they have been collected by Verso books first in 2011 with an introduction by Mark Fisher, and again in 2019 with a preface by Greil Marcus and an additional zine from 2018 (I will be referring to the 2019 edition throughout this discussion). Produced eight years into a New Labour government – having consolidated Thatcherism rather than overturned it - the zines chronicle a series of melancholic and delirious drifts - or *dérives* - through varying, sometimes indeterminate London postcodes, using a collage of photographs, grainy images, grim sketched out landscapes surrounded by extracts of loosely connected, acerbic, scabrous prose, forming a sprawling map of macro and micro-narratives. Ford charts a depressing, anti-nostalgic path through and out of the gentrified spaces of central London towards the suburban periphery, and sometimes even beyond. Despite exhibiting many of its signature features, it would be a mistake to classify Ford’s work as ‘psycho-geographical’, and she admits so herself:

“I think a lot of what is called psycho-geography now is just middle-class men acting like colonial explorers, showing us their discoveries and guarding their plot. I have spent the last twenty years walking around London and

living here in a precarious fashion, I've had about fifty addresses. I think my understanding and negotiation of the city is very different to theirs." (Ford, 2019: xvii)

This is not to discredit the psycho-geographic qualities alive within her zines, but to filter them through the master lens of hauntology, and it is worth noting that modern psycho-geographic practice was in part a response to what Michel de Certeau described as the 'totalising perspective' of the media and voyeurs high up in the city in their attempts to smother the stories attached to individual people by pushing a different narrative; a narrative of finance capital and class mobility. Psycho-geography would restore the narratives of real people and recover spaces in the city taken away from them, but as Coverley notes, the psycho-geographers of the twentieth century focused far more on individual stories and failed to engage with wider historical, sociological opportunities (Coverley, 2018:135). Hauntology is therefore a much better descriptor not only for the reasons sketched out by Ford above, but by the focus on *history* as well as space and the individual narratives connected to them. Indeed, hauntology carries out a similar function to psycho-geography in its mission to 'de-familiarise' the media's master narrative of events, yet Ford's unique perspective as a working-class woman living in precarious conditions better evinces the grand and devastating designs of Blair-Brown neoliberalism. Here, Ford provides a useful overview of what exactly was being targeted by the zines:

"I started this zine *Savage Messiah* in 2005 - and you've got to think about what the UK was like at that point. It's the Blair era, it was before the crash, there was still this sense of a kind of pseudo-buoyancy. You could still get cheap credit, and there was still a sense that people weren't fully prepared to grasp the reality of the "impending-doom" economic situation. Also, what was happening at that time, what was most kind of immediate and obvious to me, was this ongoing gentrification and "regeneration" project that was happening in London as well. I should say as well that all my work is generated through the *dérive*, or the drift; walking around and psycho-geography. This is really my way of trying to critique this urban regeneration, and the fact that spaces were being locked down. I felt increasingly that central London and places that I'd always experienced as spaces that opened up possibilities for other ways of living, and different ways of demarcating and negotiating territory, were being closed off. It was almost becoming like a gated community." (Ford interview by Fisher, 2014b:122)

It is in the channelling of ruptures in time that aspects of history, presumed to be dead or dormant, return in *Savage Messiah*, that hauntology finds its clearest expression. As Coverley notes, the “erased histories of popular dissent from the 1970s to the 1990s are rekindled in the face of a present animated by a similar spirit of unrest” (2020:250). This is *Savage Messiah*’s political unconscious – the restoration of a repressed spirit of rebellion and revolt buried under neoliberalism’s narrative of ‘urban regeneration’. Ruthlessly parodied, neoliberal aesthetics are smeared and sullied, revealed to be just another masterplan to remove class and history – the techniques of which will be discussed below.

Throughout *Savage Messiah*, Ford is less focused on documenting the point in time through which her meanderings take place, preferring to draw out evocations from the past, present and future instead. For instance, in *Savage Messiah* #1 she wanders through the Isle of Dogs, encountering the past at every step: “Ghosts of miners, printers, travellers, seething hatred of Thatcher. Sultry July night. Wapping Highway. 1986”, shortly before coming face to face with a dark premonition of the future: “Post-apocalyptic phantoms of stadia, overgrown velodromes, the dome laid to waste under a convolvulus matrix. London 2013” (Ford, 2019). Multiple London’s jostle for primacy in Ford’s narratives, particularly the Thatcherite redevelopment of the 1980s, placed in joyless opposition to her Ballardian visions of the post-Olympic ruins of the future. As noted by Coverley, dates begin to pass by with striking regularity: “1981, 2001, 1976, 1988, 1992, 1985” – and when dates are freed from the constraints of linear chronology, “intensity of experience becomes the only yardstick” (Coverley, 2020:252). Despite the chaotic structure there is a discernible pattern: images of a district, an estate, followed by a moment of tumultuous action that could have led to real social change, now confined to the past to be experienced as a spectre, a ‘lost future’. Ford experiences London as a palimpsest, a city constantly overwritten by new developments whose traces of the past linger painfully on. Certain redevelopments, such as Paddington Basin – “It feels abandoned, a showpiece of a future that never happened” – are opposed to the remains of the landscapes in the vicinity – “dank corridors defying the panopticon mapping” (Ford, 2019). Later, Ford writes, “the past holds tight the kernels of repetition and destruction”, clearly exposing the twin

forces at work in neoliberal London; the destructive erasure of the past and the promises they once contained through redevelopment schemes; and the repetition of neoliberal mantras justifying the carnage. Moreover, the form of Ford's zines mirrors the desire to revive the conditions of radical politics:

"I think with the look of the zine I was trying to restore radical politics to an aesthetic that had been rendered anodyne by advertising campaigns, Shoreditch club nights etc. [...] That anarcho-punk look was everywhere but totally emptied of its radical critique. It seemed important to go back to that moment of the late '70s and early '80s to a point where there was social upheaval, where there were riots and strikes, exciting cultural scenes and ruptures in the fabric of everyday life." (Ford, 2019: xiv)

What is hauntological about this post-punk return of an alternate present, is the realisation that this is only a return to a specific ensemble of styles and methods; nothing comparable to *Savage Messiah* was circulating in the late 70s and early 80s. Fanzines such as *Vague*, produced by Tom Vague in Salisbury starting in 1979, were more typical of the period, reproducing an amateur music journalism spurred on by NME (Vague & Fisher, 2014).

The perspectives adopted by Ford throughout *Savage Messiah* are those defeated voices left behind by the forward march of history: the punks, squatters, ravers, football hooligans and militants that Mark Fisher described as having been "Photoshopped out of its finance-friendly SimCity" (Fisher in Ford, 2019: ix). The bleak context to this subcultural cleansing is of course New Labour's distinct brand of neoliberalism: (neo)managerialism. Robert Hewison summarises this new political/ideological rationality as follows: "The new public management meant that the discipline and values of the market were applied to the formerly impersonal, politically and socially neutral world of public service. The whole government – and especially the welfare state – would be restructured along the lines of business practice" (2014:16). Via government directives, market rationality was to be fully extended into all spheres of life – a process first started in the late 1970s and 1980s, but reached its zenith throughout the New Labour period. One of the principal expressions of this business-friendly global logic is the redevelopment of areas and landscapes perceived to be sites of conflict, crime and poverty. In reality,

these urban regeneration schemes were catered for a very specific demographic of new-economy young professionals, whose consumption needs were founded upon their membership of a ‘creative class’. This creative class is of course the after-effect of the early Thatcherite vanguard of “businessmen and women, the stockbrokers and yuppies whose speedily acquired lavish lifestyles were documented in Sunday supplements and glossy ads” (Littler, 2016:88). This culturally and class based urban regeneration, or even the cultural industries more generally, tend towards “a version of high culture adapted to new elites in the immaterial economy”, so says Malcom Miles, who continues by juxtaposing this with the anthropological understanding of culture as “shared articulations and expressions of meanings and values in ordinary lives” (Miles, 2015:4). What was at stake then, was urban space catering for a multiplicity of people and cultures, versus a space designed exclusively for wealthier residents; it is affordable, modernist social housing versus the new steel and glass towers that contain rather than house their occupants, and indeed Hatherley imagines their “barricading oneself into a hermetically sealed, impeccably furnished prison against the outside world [...] assumed to be terrifying” (quoted in Miles, 2015:7). Neoliberal cityscapes thus become more symbolic than ‘real’ as they labour to determine their image along the lines of the “glitzy, spectacular and supposedly non-contentious signs of culture and innovation” (Miles, 2015:36), yet this weaponization of ‘culture’ and ‘innovation’ against the working and poorer classes only serves to reveal who participates in determining that glitzy and spectacular image, i.e., those with money.

Gentrification, however, is the specific focus of Ford’s zines. Miles defines gentrification as that which “denotes both renovation of houses of multiple (usually rented) occupation for single-owner occupation, or their division into high-rent apartments; and the conversion of de-industrialised sites (such as warehouses) to residential or mixed residential arts and retail uses” (2015:40) – and the central tenet of this process is that a gentrified space (meaning purified space) will automatically improve the social behaviour of its residents. As well as a struggle over space, Fisher suggests that there is a temporal struggle too, as any resistance to neoliberal modernisation is to consign oneself to the past, to fail to ‘adapt’ to the changing environment (Fisher in Ford, 2019:x). Nonetheless, space is the overarching

commodity - instigated by Margaret Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme in 1980 (and according to Tribune editor Ronan Burtenshaw, was similarly proposed by Labour liberals Hugh Gaitskell and Anthony Crosland as early as 1948 (2021:21)) – as council housing was sold off and never replaced fast enough to meet demand, culminating in the extreme inflation of property prices alongside the scarcity of social housing. Of the many deleterious long-term effects of this scheme, Jo Littler highlights the dismantling of rent controls and tenants' rights and protections, having led to private landlords being able to inflate rent costs astronomically; this has massively increased the public cost of subsidising the aforementioned rent hikes as welfare claimants are handing any meagre benefits directly to landlords (2016:88). Additionally, it is important to note that even after Ford produced these zines, London house prices increased by 60% between 2008-2016 (which was also the period of Boris Johnson's tenure as London Mayor) (Murphy, 2017:2), and to make matters worse, 'affordable' housing was designated as 80% of market value (Murphy, 2017:167). Indeed, part of the reason Ford mourns this transformation is that the London navigated by punks was "still a bombed-out city, full of chasms, caverns, spaces that could be temporarily occupied and squatted" (Fisher in Ford, 2019: xii). Once these spaces are off limits and enclosed by private developers, the city and its culture are sapped of their energy; the inhabitants are forced into playing the neoliberal subject, loyal to "hustling" and self-marketing in order to pay rents and mortgages in an increasingly expensive area. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval in their important work *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, summarise with precision what it means to live and work according to neoliberal doctrine: "In the new world of developing society, individuals must no longer regard themselves as workers, but as enterprises that sell a service in the market" (2017:266). Further to this, the authors make very clear the malignant relationship between the neoliberal subject and those in the class above, which is worth quoting at length:

"[Neo-managerialism is...] stamped with the blindest, most classical form of social violence peculiar to capitalism: the tendency to transform the worker into a mere commodity. The progressive erosion of the rights attaching to the status of worker, the insecurity gradually created in the whole wage-earning class by new forms of employment (casual, provisional, temporary), greater ease of dismissal, the undermining of spending power to the point of

impoverishing whole sections of the popular classes - these are so many developments that have led to a significant increase in the degree of dependence of workers on employers. This context of social fear has facilitated the establishment of neo-management in enterprises. In this respect, the naturalization of risk in neo-liberal discourse, and the increasingly direct exposure of wage-earners to market fluctuations through diminished protection and collective solidarity, are simply two sides of the same coin. By transferring risks to wage-earners, by generating an enhanced sense of risk, enterprises have been able to demand more flexibility and commitment from them."

This passage resonates with Ford's own experience in precarious employment in the early days of neoliberal London. In *Savage Messiah* #5 Ford recounts her time temporarily working in a biscuit factory in 1996 in Harlesden – London Borough of Brent – packaging chocolate bars under a verbally abusive line manager who is "still on the same shit wages as us. It's that little intoxicating taste of power, straight to his head the dickhead" (Ford, 2019). Ford provides a brief history of that same biscuit factory in order to preface her anecdote, placing the embarrassing modern conditions in stark contrast to its early twentieth-century grandeur; the factory was opened in 1902 by McVitie and Price and employed 1150 people by 1919, and 2000 people by 1939. By 1978 the factory had become the largest biscuit factory in the western world yet employed just 1600 people, with the remainder employed in offices (Ford, 2019) – Ford provides no statistics on the situation in 1996 yet her prose implies it is unimpressive; thus, history's spectral presence asserts itself.

On the next page it is 1999 and Ford is drifting through London "on long walks through the industrial estates of Park Royal and Acton" with her companion Arran, who "has a real obsession with terra incognita, unknown places that defied the map" (Ford, 2019). Each zine is structured in a similar, chronologically inconsistent manner, jumping abruptly from one micro-narrative to the next, confusing the reader yet maintaining a sense of fluidity, what Fisher described as "the releasing of pressure to be yourself, the slow unravelling of biopolitical identity, a depersonalised journey out to the erotic city that exists alongside the business city" (Fisher in Ford, 2019: xiii). Indeed, there is a certain kind of eroticism at work within all of Ford's 'drifts' as she imagines a different way of experiencing the city, one freed from the imperative to consume, existing in a kind of fugitive time absent of direction or purpose. This is

an imaginary repurposing of city space, an imaginary resolution to a real contradiction as Althusser might have argued, forcing the reader to confront the gravity of the current situation. What is additionally striking, however, is Ford's revival of the typically 'modernist' orientation to the "ebb and flow" of the city, a strategy that Baudelaire insisted upon when he declared that the modern artist should "set up his house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of motion, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite" (quoted in Berman, 2010:145). The point of surrendering oneself to the cities' "ebb and flow" is to be alive to its essence. But this essence is precisely what is absent in Ford's neoliberal London; the very ebb and flow of the city has become a spectre of modernity. It is akin to a dead city, filled with atomised individuals who are precisely that: individuals, severed of their ties to the collective, in grotesque confirmation of Thatcher's statement in 1987 that "there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families" (2013).

In drawing this discussion to a close, it is no coincidence that the most striking sonic parallel to *Savage Messiah* is the music of Burial. The two are intimately related, both evoking a strong sense of post-rave London that pines not for a nostalgic return to simpler times, but for a revival of the conditions that made it all possible, not to mention the accompanying euphoria and orientation towards the future; towards the 'new'. Burial's track "Night Bus" on *Burial* is most representative of this feeling, aurally recreating the experience of a post-club bus journey home to the outer zones of London, rain pattering against the windows, what Simon Reynolds called a "post-millennial nocturne for the loss of a collective sense of purpose", which calls out to the listener: "after the nineties, we're all on the Night Bus now" (2011:393). Furthermore, Matt Colquhoun has discussed the positive impact that aesthetic experimentations associated with rave can have on people, largely because of the inherent alterity of the experience, but also that, "the journey from a strange domesticity to the outside of cultural night life and back again should not be underestimated. Each trip encapsulates a moment of rapture that echoes, in the minds of conservative reactionaries around the world, the fear stoked by the drumming and chanting of the Cthulhu rave that Inspector Legrasse would encounter in the woods on the outside of town in

Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" (2020:240). This same fear is that which prompted the Thatcherite crackdown on raves and mass gatherings of all persuasions, provided they appeared to encourage collectivity, crowds, and radical friendship. The contradiction identified by Fisher, and elaborated on here by Colquhoun, is that neoliberal capitalism itself created the desire for rave, yet it can only obstruct and reterritorialize that desire as it threatens the ideological underpinnings demanded by that same system. Rave is the *fin de siècle* flashpoint of "lumpenproletariat excess and expression", which just like Bakhtin's "carnavalesque", the bourgeois are compelled to repress (Colquhoun, 2020:241). The immense hype of nineties dance music and rave more generally plateaued into an "impassable, monolithic and unprecedentedly fossilized late capitalist form", and the following aesthetic stagnation of the 2000s is not to be pinned on any lack of creativity on the part of artists and musicians, instead, it should be thought of as a symptom – an indirect mourning of a "whole mode of social thinking", and further than this, it should be thought of as a mourning of our collective capacity to "conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live" (Colquhoun, 2020:34). Hauntology's most immediate purpose is to observe the pathological impacts that "lost futures" has upon our culture so that different paths might be taken in the future. Moreover, Colquhoun reminds the reader that is important to conceive of ontology not as *being* – as fixed, static, unchanging – but as *becoming* – as fluid, changing, dynamic – of which hauntology is the supreme expression. Hauntology serves as a counterpoint to the ontologisation of Capitalist Realism, of neoliberalism, so that instead of thinking "There Is No Alternative", the question of "What Comes Next?" can be firmly set back upon the agenda (Colquhoun, 2020:35).

Case Study Two: Vaporwave and Nostalgia for Consumerism

The following discussion of vaporwave will offer an interesting perspective on hauntology as - normally considered to be a directly British phenomenon - vaporwave is an overwhelmingly American creation that speaks to a fundamentally different culture. Despite cultural differences, vaporwave still strongly resonates with UK audiences if it is admitted that the history of neoliberalism in the UK is also, partially, a history of the Americanisation of the UK. Additionally, vaporwave did not formally emerge until the early 2010s, following the eclipse in popularity of UK hauntology, so can therefore be seen as an extension of that hauntological impulse on different terms. One of the first sustained attempts to engage with vaporwave politically was Grafton Tanner's excellent book *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* published by Zer0 in 2016. Tanner situates vaporwave historically, as responding specifically to the perceived cultural and societal inertia of the 21st century, playing on the rampant nostalgia of Reynolds' 'retromania', as well as the 'loss of innocence' and memory in a post-9/11 world. I will consider each of these factors in turn, alongside some additional comparisons to the uncanniness of UK hauntology, as well as a judgement on how 'subversive' vaporwave can really be considering its appeal to more reactionary forces.

Defining vaporwave is notoriously difficult – a difficulty hardwired into vaporwave's appeal as an "outside", undefinable genre. Consequently, an exhaustive definition would be both laborious and undesirable. Nonetheless, a number of formal features can be identified as frequently occurring across the genre, if "genre" is understood in the typically Adornoian sense of 'standardisation', which in itself is something that vaporwave attempts to deconstruct, taking the "over-standardisation" of music as its target and exaggerating it through repetitive sampling (Glitsos, 2018:101). Broadly, vaporwave is a style of music that uses a collage of mostly background noises such as muzak, 1980s-1990s elevator and mall music, new age ambient sounds, as well as the remixing of hugely famous pop songs. Song structures vary from the short 20 seconds – 1 minute spoof tracks to the interminably long 7–10-minute repetitive ballad parodies, all of which are usually slow, sitting around 60-90 bpm. Glitsos highlights the burial of

vocal samples beneath a mix saturated with heavy reverb and slowed down beats to produce a “stretched out” or “melting” effect (2018:100). The overarching ‘theme’ vaporwave incorporates and responds to is the digitally heralded informational and cultural oversaturation of life in the twenty-first century.

Additionally, vaporwave forms part of a massive style “family” of genres with a similar sensibility, these include sea punk, future funk, witch house, chillwave, hardvapour, retrowave and Soviet wave, to name just a select few, some of which will be discussed further. What is additionally unique about the genre is how it largely ignored by the mainstream music press, existing outside the sphere of public relations, instead, subsisting and flourishing in an entirely “underground” online community. The music is freely available and rarely sold, hosted on sites such as Mediafire, Last FM, Bandcamp, SoundCloud, YouTube and Reddit, the latter having a lively (at the time of writing) 205,000-member subreddit (r/Vaporwave) dedicated to sharing and discussing new releases (whilst the YouTube channel Vapor Memory currently has 128,000 subscribers, functioning as a kind of unmonetized internet library home to just about every vaporwave release ever, averaging at around 3000 to 10000 views per upload). Indeed, a lot can be learnt about vaporwave by simply reading the subreddit’s ‘about’ section:

“Global capitalism is nearly there. At the end of the world there will only be liquid advertisement and gaseous desire. Sublimated from our bodies, our untethered senses will endlessly ride escalators through pristine artificial environments, more and less than human, drugged-up and drugged down, catalysed, consuming and consumed by a relentlessly rich economy of sensory information, valued by the pixel. The Virtual Plaza welcomes you, and you will welcome it too.” (<https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/>)

Importantly, this quote is actually pulled from the first paragraph of Adam Harper’s 2012 article “Vaporwave and the pop-art of the virtual plaza” for *Dummy* magazine – one of the first attempts to link critical theory and philosophy with the genre. There are two main points worth unpacking here; first, the vapor-like adjectives “liquid” and “gaseous” are explicitly linked to “global capitalism”, importantly recalling Marx and Engels’ famous line from *The Communist Manifesto*: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of

life, and his relations with his kind” (Marx & Engels, 1888:476). This was intended to illustrate the effect of “class-consciousness” on human beings; that once they come to realise that bourgeois society is constantly revolutionising that society to suit their needs at the expense of the working classes, “all that is solid” will thus melt away, evincing the real, antagonistic relationship between workers and capitalists. In context, vaporwave’s liquid and gaseous aesthetics indicate a similar intent to consciousness-raising – that the rampant consumerism of late capitalism is a mask perpetuated through advertising, a wispy façade of fabricated desires, all working to conceal the real social relations between people, as well as their relationship to the neoliberal governing class. Secondly, Harper’s references to shopping malls and the “Virtual Plaza” highlight the ubiquity of capital in public spaces; that it is present on TV, in our phones, penetrating the mind nearly all the time, comes second to its representation when interfacing with the public – office lobby’s, hotel reception areas and shopping centres, for instance. “This music belongs in the *plaza*, literal and metaphorical, real and imaginary – the public space that is the nexus of infinite social, cultural and financial transactions and the scene of their greatest activity and spectacle” (Harper, 2012). What is significant about this is that the plaza was historically associated with a civic, public realm; a kind of communal space belonging to everyone and no one; and Harper reminds us that “These days the plaza is privately owned but the public can come and spend their money on the nice things there” (2012).

This talk of plazas and public spaces raises another problem encountered through vaporwave: the non-place. Anthropologist Marc Augé defined the “place” as “relational, historical and concerned with identity”, concluding that if a place cannot be defined by those things then it is logically a “non-place” – and his overall thesis declared that Supermodernity (the anthropological equivalent of postmodernity, late capitalism) produces non-places in abundance (2008:63). Augé elaborates on some of the defining characteristics of non-places:

“[...] the real non-places of Supermodernity – the ones we inhabit when we are driving down the motorway, wandering through the supermarket or sitting in an airport lounge [...] have the peculiarity that they are defined

partly by the words and texts they offer us: their ‘instructions for use’, which may be prescriptive (‘Take right-hand lane’), prohibitive (‘No smoking’) or informative (‘You are now entering the Beaujolais region’). Sometimes these are couched in more or less explicit and codified ideograms (on road signs, maps and tourist guides), sometimes in ordinary language. This establishes the traffic conditions of spaces in which individuals are supposed to interact only with texts, whose proponents are not individuals, but ‘moral entities’ or institutions” (2008:78)

Anyone entering or passing through a non-place is relieved of their “usual determinants”, becoming no more than what amounts to the actions performed in the role of “customer”, “passenger” or “driver”. Augé equates this experience with a “gentle form of possession”, allowing those possessed beings to temporarily surrender their identities for the passive joys of anonymity, becoming absorbed in a role not of their own making (2008:82). Of course, the most remarkable and uncanny effect of the non-place is its reproducibility; each non-place has a more or less standardised appearance and feel wherever they can be found. Their geographical consistency is uncanny precisely because thousands of miles can be travelled between each non-place yet they will always remain familiar. Indeed, they resemble one another more than any other place; every 24/7 petrol station, supermarket, drive-thru, fast-food chain, airport, hotel etc., remains clearly identifiable wherever they can be found. Moreover, they exist to facilitate the buying and selling of goods and services, intimately bound up with global capitalism in that they are almost constantly in use. Vaporwave is the anthem of the *vacant* non-place, or as Harper implied, the shopping mall at the end of the world. A good example of this was pointed out by Kiberd, identifying the “mall tour” videos uploaded to YouTube which take stock footage and images of empty malls, food courts, glassy surfaces, moving escalators with nobody on them whilst a vaporwave mix plays over the top (2021). The effect is strangely calming, but there is a palpably unsettling feeling lurking somewhere beneath, making one wonder whether it would be more or less unsettling if there were no music playing. In the words of Marc Augé: “The non-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society” (2008:90).

Tanner holds that as vaporwave attempts to defamiliarize these non-places, it is therefore firmly within the realm of the uncanny. Drawing on Dylan Trigg, as I did in an earlier section, Tanner asserts that “our memories function like the spaces that we used to frequent or even inhabit [...] Experience and place are intertwined, allowing my memory to form from a particular feeling of childhood as well as a particular place” (2016:3). The uncanny disrupts these memories, and vaporwave accomplishes this in two main ways: sonically and visually. Visually, vaporwave album covers typically rely on 1980s/1990s personal computing motifs (images of PCs, mice, keyboards, old Microsoft logos), early examples of digital graphic design and fonts, soft pastel colours, as well as very questionable Orientalist appropriations of images and designs signifying a “futuristic” Japan. Other common features include: palm trees, sports cars (the DeLorean appears on several covers), Greco-Roman busts and statues, plastic water bottles, cityscapes, corporate workspaces and offices, and invariable empty shopping centres (Whelan & Nowak, 2018:453) – but I shall focus on the sonic features for now, returning to the visuals later. Sonically, it is the crackly, glitchy, malfunctioning repetition indicating that there might be ghosts in the machine; specifically, the ghosts of early, analogue media haunting the sleek, liquid form of digital media, reminding the listener that the very music technologies of earlier periods were associated with the future, much in the same way that Burial’s music utilises crackle. Additionally, a huge amount of vaporwave’s source material comes from what Tanner calls “peripheral music” – “music designed for playback at the peripheries of our daily life rarely intended for direct listening” (2016:40). This includes the sampling of sounds heard whilst in airports, supermarkets, waiting rooms, shopping centres; music heard whilst on hold, watching TV commercials, and most stereotypically, elevator music. These are the sounds accompanying the tedious yet obligatory errands and actions required from populations every day; it is, in Tanner’s words, “the lubricant that glides us along our journey of daily material existence, from non-place to non-place, engaging in the glories of the free market while narcotizing ourselves to discomfort” (2016:40). ‘Muzak’ is perhaps the best example of this peripheral music, defined as, “music made and programmed for business environments to reduce stress, combat fatigue, and enhance sales” (Lanza quoted in Tanner, 2016:40). Muzak is, of course, not the kind of music usually subjected to

critical analysis, or used to serenade guests, yet vaporwave dismisses these assumptions by swiftly recontextualising it. Muzak is re-framed and re-represented to listeners as a cultural artefact worth paying attention to, “forcing us to reconsider Muzak’s subversive qualities and its inane catchiness” (Tanner, 2016:41) – importantly alerting listeners to the omnipresence of a force rarely acknowledged: “Vaporwave takes the fit, smiling, white-teethed mask off Muzak and replaces it with a more sinister face – the dead stare of unfettered capitalism” and, Tanner continues, this transformation restores the forgotten history of “capitalism’s incessant push to keep the populace working, no matter the mental condition, physical disability, or personal circumstance” (2016:41).

The most important instrument for vaporwave is the electronic music sampler, as any piece of music can be manipulated to create something new; indeed, entire songs can be produced exclusively out of audio samples bereft of reference or context, a practice that Tanner describes as “the ultimate postmodern gesture”, as a 1970s disco track could be merged with a Charles Mingus tune in the creation of “an ahistorical piece of music, giving new life to “dead” records” (2016:6), encouraging the postmodern urge to flatten historical frames into a continuous present (Kaplan quotes in Glitsos, 2018:102). Importantly, sampling exposes gaps in the supposedly seamless listening experience of the digital age; for instance, gaps in authorship, continuity, as well as the information required to determine originality. Furthermore, there is a certain overlap between authorship as parodied within the texts, and the authors of vaporwave themselves; the producer Romana Xavier, for instance, has released music under a plethora of aliases: Vektroid, Macintosh Plus, New Dreams Ltd., Sacred Tapestry, esc 不在 and 情報デスクVIRTUAL. It is not only important that there should be many aliases, but that they should be inscrutable too, often utilising a great deal of numbers, symbols and foreign languages in order to resist being easily archived or even found on google.

Repetition is perhaps the most frequently invoked technique in vaporwave, often looping samples for almost the entire length of the track, walking a fine line between being funny and boring; on the precipice of the uncanny. For instance, one of the funniest vaporwave tracks is “drive home thru the stars

for you” from the 2011 album *black horse* by esc 不在. The track consists of a sixteen-second sample repeated four times, coming to an end just as a pitched-down vocal is about to kick in, only for it to be cut off as soon as it is heard. The effect is as if the vocal has been deliberately cut off as a jest on the part of the artist, or perhaps even the technology itself, seemingly alive, asserting dominance over the human element. The truncated sample subverts the listeners expectations; to the culturally attuned ear, the pop-song is supposed to progress into the first verse, with the remainder of the soft rock ballad assumed to follow, but it simply cannot, terminally repeating until the track ends at one minute six seconds - and one minute six seconds is seemingly all it takes to make a mockery of soft rock balladry in its entirety.

Another, slightly different example, is “Sports Champions” from the 2013 album *Ghost Broadcast* by Local News. Here, a sample of Frank Sinatra singing “Here’s to the winners...” is repeated throughout the song for almost the entire 3:42 track length, which initially, sounds as if the line possesses some immediacy, but is quickly transformed into a mere soundbite; equal parts vapid and disturbing. As Tanner suggests, “Sports Champions” is “the sound of a song trying to find its footing and never escaping the circular dungeon of the intro”, and indeed, “repetition spells a loss of humanity in favour of the machine” (2016:9). Perhaps the champion of repetition - and glitch - is vaporwave artist Transilvanian Hunger (of course, purposefully spelt incorrectly), whose 2013 album *葛城 ミサト* (roughly translated to “Misato Katsuragi” – a character from the anime Neon Genesis Evangelion) revels in sample abuse, featuring grotesquely pitched-down and spliced up vocals as in the track “G1, G2, ..., Gm g f1(A1'), f2(A2'), ..., fk(Ak') (r)”. Each track in the album feels unstable, shaky, as if nothing is really holding it together, perhaps best demonstrated by “C++”, progressively becoming more chaotic as samples clash into one another and switch places, in a kind of disorganised sublime, simultaneously entrancing and uncanny. This is without mentioning that some of the most ridiculous track names of any vaporwave release are concentrated on this one record, see: “ $R \times S = \{(r_1, r_2, \dots, r_n, s_1, s_2, \dots, s_m) \mid (r_1, r_2, \dots, r_n) \in R, (s_1, s_2, \dots, s_m) \in S\}$ ”, “01110100 01101000 01100101 0100000 01100101 01101110 01100100” and “std::cout << "Hello, world!\n";”. If listeners are to keep track of their favourite albums, artists, songs, etc., they have to be

actively cataloguing them with bookmarked websites, Bandcamp lists, YouTube playlists etc., as remembering these titles is a near impossible task. Track titles such as these, combined with the features and themes previously discussed, all contribute to vaporwave's expert synthesis of anti-capitalist values. As Tanner contends, "vaporwave is critical of late capitalism at every stage of its production, from its source material to the way the music is distributed and sold (if at all)" (2016:39).

In linking this discussion back to hauntology and lost futures, it is clear that a case can be made for vaporwave challenging contemporary neoliberalism by confronting it with all the cultural cringe and detritus associated with the 1980s/1990s (Glitsos, 2018:103). What is significant about these signifiers specifically, is that, just like rave culture, they signified the "future" – unparalleled rates of progress in technology and the increase in consumer goods instilled a strange, even cruel, sense of optimism into millennials growing up within that culture. As Mangos writes, "Vaporwave questions the promise and idealism of that era", noting that the threat of communism had disappeared in line with Fukuyama's declaration that liberal democracy had won; that "greed was good and, crucially, [...] computers became commercially available for the first time, offering a brighter and easier future" (Mangos quoted in Whelan & Nowak, 2018:456). Indeed, Jean Baudrillard, writing as early as 1968, had predicted the power that consumer objects would come to have over society in his book *The System of Objects*. According to Baudrillard, the system of objects has given way to the 'functionalist myth', in which human beings have been alienated from their gestural imperative over the object; the ability to *wield* directly the power of transformation over one's environment. Where the technical object has eclipsed the traditional gestural object, man is left only to contemplate his sheer power over the environment as the effort required to transform it has severely diminished. Therefore, man is left to believe that technological progress will *never* cease – a process that Baudrillard compares to a primitive belief in magic. Furthermore, he contends, "this applies not only to technological society in a global sense but also – confusedly but tenaciously – to the everyday environment, where the most insignificant gadgets may be the focal point of a technological realm of power" (2005:61). In this sense, the way that everyday objects are used and

perceived, “no longer requiring anything more than formal participation”, is enough to generate a “world without effort, an abstract and completely mobile energy, and the total efficacy of sign-gestures” (Baudrillard, 2005:61). A fascinating example of this naïve faith in the future – based upon “insignificant gadgets” - is ‘VaporWare’: “a derisory term for a software or hardware project undertaken by a tech company that is announced to the public but which, after much time passes, never actually comes to fruition” (Harper, 2012). Moreover, Harper also notes that in the late 90s and early 2000s, these tech companies would occasionally fabricate product releases entirely, never intending to develop them beyond the press releases and commercials, cynically capitalising on the ‘functionalist myth’, as consumers would seemingly buy into hype alone. So, VaporWare describes lost futures on its own terms, but vaporwave makes excellent use of its imagery and phonetic similarity in pushing its own anti-capitalist and hauntological agenda.

One final point I want to briefly explore before concluding is Tanner’s suggestion that the September 11th attacks of 2001 “shocked” the world into a state of “cultural regression” – and that this regression has persisted ever since, intensifying after the 2008 recession (2016:52). This is a fundamentally different thesis to the one proposed by Mark Fisher, namely, that the material conditions for artists and musicians to produce the “new” have disappeared as a direct result of neoliberal policy, thus paving the way for a properly postmodern culture of recycling. There is no doubt an element of truth in the idea that post-9/11 culture is imbued with a sense of trauma – the idea that “it can’t happen here” – but I feel that vaporwave exaggerates this trauma, and more importantly, uncritically subscribing to this thesis will set politics to one side. Indeed, Glitsos has proposed the idea that vaporwave is essentially, a genre obsessed with the repression of trauma: “I suggest that vaporwave calls forth collective trauma through the empty sound of tinny beats and hollowed out drum tracks, to express forms of anguish that alienate and isolate the individual” (2018:108). Vaporwave could be said to recycle and repurpose traumatic residues; that by conducting such a close mimesis of pre-9/11 musical and cultural forms, vaporwave simultaneously pretends that the event did not happen - or, has not happened yet.

Consequently, societal innocence can be maintained, permitting the use of kitschy aesthetics and brazen sounds, however, the spectres of the ‘Real’ are always lurking just beneath the surface, ready to expose the collective guilt of a supposedly ‘young’ society. This is a compelling thesis, but it would be more accurate to describe vaporwave as being a more straightforward critique of neoliberalism than ‘post-9/11’ culture per se. For instance, the most popular vaporwave release ever (practically inaugurating the genre in the process) is the 2011 album *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus, who’s creator – producer Ramona Xavier – has admitted that the album explicitly critiques the neoliberal commitment to constant improvement of the self through work: “I grew up with my dad working at Microsoft for a decade, and I grew up isolated [...] and I watched the job sort of suck the life force out of him [...] these companies are destroying us as a society and their employees are just a by-product” (Xavier quotes in Tanner, 2016:47). Other examples include the track “HOLLYWOOD SUPERSTAR (INTRO) ハリウッドのスーパースター” from the 2015 album *Pioneer* by 3D BLAST, in which a gentle piece of muzak plays against a progressively discordant and chaotic xylophone melody whilst a seemingly raw, unedited sound file of a man speaking into a microphone starts to play. The voice makes a deadpan mockery of the typically neoliberal attitude to being “proactive” and “mobile” at all times whilst laughter can be heard in the background, for instance: “I have a track list on my iPod when I do on-the-go playlists these are also useful for when I am running and enables me to listen to a certain selection of music for I am on-the-go”. The track “Visceral -- MIND OVER MATTER (feat. Replica Federation)” from the same album begins with an electronic synth rhythm preceding the introduction of a pitched-down voice cloaked in reverb and delay, each syllable ringing out into a ghostly effect saying: “So, you want to be an entrepreneur? Well let me tell you something, if you want to be an entrepreneur, you’ll never make one. You either ARE or you aren’t”. Here, the core principle of neoliberal rationality is turned sinister: the supreme logic of ‘competition’, that Dardot and Laval identified as having been universalized so that “everyone is an enterprise to be managed and a capital to be made to bear fruit” (2017:302).

The evidence presented thus far suggests that vaporwave could be identified as a genre hardwired to critique neoliberal capitalism through its formal techniques, as well as the hauntological dimension concerning the critique of the “lost futures” associated with 90s tech culture. However, it cannot be ignored that the vaporwave aesthetic and sensibility has been weaponised and appropriated by reactionary forces:

“[...] in the formal vocabulary of the alt-right is an excessive and sentimental yearning for the 1980s and 1990s.

Vaporwave, for instance, a genre brimming with selective nostalgia, spawned two white ethno-nationalist sub-genres: fashwave and Trumpwave. Fashwave combines images of Greco-Roman marbles and Tron-like grids, pastel colours and palm trees, tying the mythical origin of white civilisation to the American dream and the joyful promises of the early internet years.” (Pinto, 2019:328)

To this example I would add “boriswave”, appearing late into the Conservative party’s 2019 election campaign, and consisting of a single track uploaded to YouTube as “lo fi boriswave beats to relax/get brexit done to” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cre0in5n-1E&t=1264s>). The video sets a still image of Boris Johnson reading on a train against a dynamic background animation visible through the compartment’s window. As the title suggests, over an hour’s worth of anodyne “lo-fi” beats with the occasional Johnson quote accompany the graphic. Although divorced from the fundamentals of vaporwave in almost every way, boriswave leeches off of the overall sensibility by being repetitive whilst poking fun at what music can and can’t be. Nonetheless, the video remains a naked attempt to win over younger voters by banking on the empty phrase “get brexit done”, which does not inherently contain any positive content. Even so, inverting the political message does not lead to its universal acceptance within the community. The online spaces in which vaporwave thrives contain scarcely any traces of ‘fashwave’ or ‘boriswave’ – the latter essentially boiling down to a trivial internet meme. Instead, if vaporwave is to be critiqued from the point of view of hauntology, it is more useful to account for some of the more popular subgenres: chillwave and future funk. Both of these subgenres could easily be subsumed under the master genre of vaporwave, yet they differ in some important respects. Firstly, the most subversive

aspects of the genre are either discarded completely or significantly down-played. For instance, the chillwave artist Windows 96 confidently appropriates the retro aesthetics, but discards the repetitive, glitchy aspects which made it subversive in the first place. The album covers borrow from the digital graphic designs and Microsoft aesthetics of the early 2000s, yet are too sleek and perfect in their overall production values – quite obviously a product of their time. The 2018 album *One Hundred Mornings* for instance, is designed to resemble an edition of Microsoft Windows from the late 90s – and the artists’ moniker ‘Windows 96’ recalls an operating system that never existed - but this is where the subversion starts and ends; each track is masterfully composed, comforting the listener with gentle synths and unhurried electronic beats. No glitch, repetition, stuttering, sample abuse; just good vibes. Each album by Windows 96 is truly pleasant; a joy to listen to. More worryingly, each track on *One Hundred Mornings* would not sound out of place on the *Stranger Things* soundtrack – a deeply nostalgic 2016 Netflix series set in the 1980s. This is deeply problematic for the vaporwave genre as it loses its uncanniness and hauntological effect; listeners are not galvanised into a position of class-consciousness as they are not presented with anything startling. Chillwave is a thoroughly *aestheticized* genre, shorn of any explicit links to critiquing global capitalism. Future funk takes a slightly different approach, retaining certain techniques like glitch and repetition but maintaining restraint in their use and intensity, usually invoked for comedic effect and always delightful to listen to. For instance, the 2013 album *Hit Vibes* by SAINT PEPSI - a quintessential future funk album – draws heavily on popular 80s funk, groove, dance and disco music and is significantly faster than most vaporwave tracks. Each track samples an infectious beat, riff or vocal and submits it to brutal yet playful repetition. However, the effect is not uncanny or jarring in the slightest as the very nature of the source material is upbeat and joyous; without additional effects like crackle, glitch, pitch shifting, muzak sampling etc., this cannot change. Additionally, the conventional pop song structure remains essentially unchanged, they are simply reorganised, uncritical and amped up celebrations of existing tracks.

Conclusion: Whither Hauntology?

Almost 30 years ago, at a conference titled “Wither Marxism?”, Derrida coined the term hauntology in order to address the “spectres of Marx”. Here, with reference to the examples provided throughout this thesis, I will attempt to make a similar judgement on hauntology itself. I have argued that the cultural hauntology fixated upon by Mark Fisher and co, attempts an Althusserian “imaginary resolution” to real societal contradictions. The texts accomplish this primarily by blurring the boundaries between the past, present and future, importantly foregrounding the more ‘analogue’ elements of a text to make them appear as much a part of the text as the contemporary elements. The intended effect, or “resolution”, is to present audiences with an alternative to the way things are; to prove that history could have turned out quite differently. This was demonstrated through Burial’s use of crackle and pitch shifting alongside a clearly twenty-first century production value. Laura Grace Ford achieved a similar effect by forcing readers to confront the secret history attached to landscapes by transforming familiar areas into wastelands, raising important questions about what neoliberalism is doing to the built and natural environments. Vaporwave presented a more inconsistent case study, yet its importance and relevance to hauntology is often overlooked, which is why I felt compelled to include it. What vaporwave – in its most hauntological form – achieves, is a more ironic yet just as uncanny judgement upon recent history. Vaporwave defamiliarizes the cosy memories one might have of the consumer boom and music culture of the late 90s and early 2000s, mixing production values in similar fashion to Burial. However, as has been discussed, vaporwave is seemingly the most susceptible to being used for reactionary ends. Furthermore, vaporwave lacks the representation of “alternatives” in the way that Burial and Laura Grace Ford do, relying instead upon dismantling the lost future that a tech-fuelled consumer boom was supposed to deliver.

However, other commentators have taken aim at Mark Fisher’s idea of hauntology when applied to artists such as Burial. One blogger has argued against Fisher’s claim that 90s culture – and jungle specifically – was the last bastion of ‘popular modernism’:

“His defenders might claim that jungle and the other genres which, to him, represented qualitative changes in musical timbre also represented a radical break from what came before. But is this really true? Can we not trace a clear progression through almost all musical styles? From blues to rock? From rock to metal? From early electro to techno, house and their subsequent incarnations? Even jungle’s roots can be traced quite clearly through a certain combination hardcore breakbeat, techno, ragga, reggae, and a variety of other styles.” (Bluemink quoted in Colquhoun, 2021a)

This argument assumes that culture is forever recombinant, implies that it is simply regenerative, that it is almost a *natural* process. Indeed, what this argument neglects is Fisher’s proposal that culture *responds* to changes in material conditions. Popular modernism is no longer possible because the conditions for its creation have been eradicated. Colquhoun argues that charting a genres history and development through genealogical lines, as Bluemink does, is desirable from a more taxonomic perspective, but it “precisely neglects those in-situational events where innovation happens, as well as the conditions under which such events were able to occur” (Colquhoun, 2021a). When rave and jungle are reduced to an aesthetic change in a musical style or attitude, critics ignore the socio-political-cultural context accompanying and driving the movement. This is why hauntology is a work of *mourning*, as well as an incitement to think differently about the present. The mourning of “lost futures” in general, however, have been subject to a particularly devastating critique by Alex Williams:

"Hauntology is a cowardly move, lusting after utopias that never were, or which are now unreachable, a retreat into childhood/youth, just as trapped in the endless re-iterative mechanistics of the postmodern as the lowest form of retroism, merely in a hyper-self-aware form. In summary, hauntology cedes too much ground to what it attempts to oppose, because of an a priori assumption: that there is nothing else, (at this moment in time at least) that nothing else is possible, and as such we are to make the best of this (and that the best we can do is to hint at the possible which remains forever out of reach — with all the pseudo-messianic dimensions this involves)." (quoted in Colquhoun, 2021b)

Hauntology, by tacitly admitting that right now “there is no alternative”, is therefore exposed as ultimately contributing more to Capitalist Realism than it could subtract from. The absence of an

alternative *in the present* is precisely what is problematic; it seemingly functions to cognitively and aesthetically map the cultural condition of neoliberalism in order to negate it, not to present an alternative. *Savage Messiah* presents the reader with glimpses of protests and parties from the past – hinting at what could have been – but can only imagine a ruinous future (for instance, images of a bombed-out London after the 2012 Olympics). The same is true of Burial, whom Alex Williams positively characterises: “By foregrounding the processes at the material level (sampling, versioning, deliberately invoking buried/false childhood memories etc) it is contended that such music comes to terms with the deadlock which we face, the inability to properly think the new as such, and makes of this condition something positive” (Williams quoted in Colquhoun, 2021c). But this reasoning can quickly be turned on its head as, in the same article, Colquhoun suggests that hauntology, “was postmodernity mournfully celebrating its own catastrophism. It wasn’t *anti*-postmodernism, but the latest twist in late-capitalism’s in-grown dialectic” (2021c). This back and forth brings to mind an inspiring passage from Fredric Jameson:

"The desire called Utopia must be concrete and ongoing, without being defeatist or incapacitating; it might therefore be better to follow an aesthetic paradigm and to assert that not only the production of the unresolvable contradiction is the fundamental process, but that we must imagine some form of gratification inherent in this very confrontation with pessimism and the impossible." (Jameson, 2007:84)

I think that what Jameson says here bares a complex resemblance to the contradictions presented through hauntology: the bleak and frightening creations of Laura Grace Ford or Burial are not by any means an "unresolvable contradiction", but the potential for imagining some form of gratification out of this contradiction remains true. It is not that hauntology is a fundamentally defeatist and incapacitating form of art, rather, it stages the universal defeatism and incapacity felt by subjects of Capitalist Realism. Despite these shortcomings it is clear that hauntology as genre, and a way of thinking, has prompted some important theoretical discussions, although it is also equally important to consider that these debates have always centred on *Western* culture, and that it would be mistaken to apply this lens to other cultures and expect similar findings.

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