

Cultural Ghosts: Hauntology and The Caretaker

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Introduction

Despite its vaporous qualities, memory has the potential to shape our identities, personalities, and inform how we navigate through the world.¹ Our reliance on memory is complicated by the inconsistencies in its recovery and the melancholic pull of nostalgia. Recollections from our past are painted a rosy hue in our unfulfilled present, but when we are stripped of the ability to recollect, how, then, can we go about piecing together our identity? The concept of hauntology, originally posited by Jacques Derrida in the early 1990s, relies on the intersections of memories and how we are haunted by the past – a past that anticipated a future that never occurred. Adopting this term as a musical genre designator, cultural theorist and writer Mark Fisher has suggested many of the artists that fall under the umbrella of hauntology are “haunted by a paradoxical nostalgia: a nostalgia for all the futures that were lost when culture’s modernist impetus succumbed to the terminal temporality of postmodernity.”² Beyond just a loss of creative inertia, there is a pessimistic loss of hope tangled within this genre.

Hauntology has spawned its own musical ecosystem and become the sonic representation of this concept of a haunted past in our hopeless future. As the pall of our postmodern world continues to loom over us, hauntology seeks to explore perceptions of the past and shared cultural memory to investigate our longing for these lost futures once promised to us. Many artists and labels within the musical genre of hauntology focus on the aesthetics of this niche

¹ Yannick Stephan, et al, “Memory and Personality Development in Adulthood: Evidence From Four Longitudinal Studies,” *Journals of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences* 76, no.1 (Jan 2021): 92. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbaa086>.

² Mark Fisher, “The Metaphysics of Crackle,” *Dancecult* 5, no. 2 (2013): 45. <https://doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2013.05.02.03>.

movement with the addition of decayed samples, loops, and record crackles as a means of manipulating nostalgia. By creating an entire musical identity around the relationship between music and memory's often-inconsistent retrieval, James Leyland Kirby under his moniker The Caretaker, a foundational figure within this world of sonic hauntology, has spent the last twenty-five year cultivating the genre's thematic underpinnings of lost futures, degradation, identity, and cultural memory in a way that transcends many of his peers, and the messaging of his music remains exceedingly evocative and timely.

Hauntology: The Concept

The tendrils of this musical genre, along with many other forms of art over the last 20 years, extend from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's inspection of the postmodern world and the intersections of economic theory and philosophy explored in his controversial work *Specters of Marx*. The piece examines post-Communist Europe and the philosophies espoused in *The Communist Manifesto*'s opening proclamation that "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism."³ The "specter" in question here, however, was Marxism, and Derrida suggests that like the phantoms lurking in the corners of a shadowy Victorian home, its ghostly deconstructive hand will haunt the hyper-capitalist neoliberalism of Western civilization.⁴ This reading of our shared past as haunting our present has been a foundational tenet in the evolution of the concept of hauntology – a term derived by Derrida from the word "ontology" to explore the nature of being and the fractured temporality of such an out-of-time concept.⁵ As Derrida

³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Quoted In *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 2.

⁴ Colin Davis, "Hauntology, Spectres and Phantoms," *French Studies* 59, no. 3 (July 2005): 376. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kni143>.

⁵ Fisher, "The Metaphysics of Crackle," 44.

puts it, “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. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology.”⁶ While the term hauntology first appears in this work by Derrida, the pessimistic interpretation of a disjointed past infecting an inert present has transformed over the last several decades since its creation.

Technological advancements have both accelerated our desire to explore the nature of artistic creation and illuminated the fact that we’re unable to make proper sense of our rapidly evolving world. Or, as anthropologists Sadeq Rahimi and Byron Good put it, “The speed of change is exceeding the inertia of our intellectual imagination at such a pace that we often find ourselves ill equipped to make useful sense of what is already unfolding in front of our eyes.”⁷ This acceleration fostered a turn to retro fetishism as a means to repurpose the past in order to update the stagnated present. Because of the historical idealized view of a future that was never established, we have become dependent on recycling the past, as music journalist and formative hauntological theorist Simon Reynolds posits in his book *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past*:

This kind of retromania has become a dominant force in our culture, to the point where it feels like we've reached some kind of tipping point. Is nostalgia stopping our culture's

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 202.

⁷ Sadeq Rahimi and Byron J. Good, “Preface: Ghosts, Haunting, and Hauntology,” *Ethos* 47, no. 4 (January 26, 2020): 409. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12256>.

ability to surge forward, or are we nostalgic precisely because our culture has stopped moving forward and so we inevitably look back to more momentous and dynamic times?⁸ This question of a cultural loss of momentum extends beyond pop culture and can be witnessed in the incremental advances, entrenchment of lawmaking and politics, and the stalemate of actionable progressive change.⁹ These combining forces foster the belief that we have reached a historical impasse. Our haunted past and the loss of an idealized future may mean that we have approached, “the end of history”, or as political scientist Francis Fukuyama puts it, “... we have become so accustomed by now to expect that the future will contain bad news with respect to the health and security of decent, liberal, democratic political practices that we have problems recognizing good news when it comes.”¹⁰ Derrida, on the other hand, refutes the neo-liberalism of Fukuyama’s vague and overly-optimistic concept of this arrival of “good news” and he likens this anticipatory event as “Awaiting without horizon of the wait.”¹¹ This end of history can be read optimistically as the beginning of a new utopian experience, as Fukuyama has done here, or pessimistically as an end of forward cultural momentum, as interpreted by Derrida and hauntology’s focus on lost futures. Due to this pessimism and the ever-looming dominance of unchecked capitalism under neoliberalism, the Western world has become so reliant on recollections and repurposing of the past, exacerbated by technology and political and economic deadlock, that we can no longer manifest our once idealized future.

⁸ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York, NY: Faber and Faber, 2011), xiv.

⁹ Michael D. Gilbert, “Entrenchment, Incrementalism, and Constitutional Collapse,” *Virginia Law Review* 103, no. 4 (June 2017): 636–637. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26400253>.

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1992), xiii.

¹¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 81.

Hauntology: The Genre

Beyond the socio-economic underpinning of hauntology as a concept, what, then, is hauntology in a musical sense? In addition to its “past inside the present” repurposing of dated sonics and trends, there is an inherent spectral quality to the music within this loosely articulated genre of hauntology.¹² Some touchstones of the genre are the characteristic textured crackle of vinyl, heavily affected samples, repurposing of dated sounds and forms of playback to evoke nostalgia, sonic degradation, and a sense of temporal displacement.¹³ These sonic characteristics are often realized by incorporating tones and textures from media from bygone eras to recreate the idealistic futurism established during the past, the use of period-specific analog instruments and recognizable samples intended to trigger nostalgia, or by giving the music a textured grain to make it sound degraded or aged, almost as if it has been transported from another time. The genre’s associations with nostalgia and its commentary on the state of our neoliberal capitalistic present can range from playful to suspicious to downright frightening.¹⁴ These features can be found within many of the artists whose work has been characterized as hauntological, most notably within the output of the enigmatic Scottish duo Boards of Canada. The duo gained notoriety in the 1990s and their output during the subsequent decade would act as a precursor to the influx of hauntological artists and labels that would become established in the early aughts.

Boards of Canada’s subliminally psychedelic interpretation of intelligent dance music mixed a psychedelic sensibility with an at times terrifying repurposing of imagery and sounds

¹² Adam Harper, “Hauntology: The Past Inside The Present,” October 27, 2009, <http://rougesfoam.blogspot.com/2009/10/hauntology-past-inside-present.html>.

¹³ Fisher, “The Metaphysics of Crackle,” 47-49.

¹⁴ Harper, “Hauntology: The Past Inside The Present.”

from the public broadcast television of their youth.¹⁵ The standout song “Aquarius” from their iconic 1998 debut full-length album *Music Has the Right to Children* expertly employs all of these qualities in an evocative web of nostalgic samples and subtext. A distant, ghostly synth texture is accompanied by a grooving beat that includes the slap bass line from the identically titled track “Aquarius” from the 1979 musical film *Hair*. As the song progresses, we hear samples from old episodes of *Sesame Street* of children laughing and saying, “yeah that’s right” as a disembodied robotic voice repeats the word “orange.” These elements eventually punctuate a stoic woman’s voice systematically counting from 1 to 36 before splintering into a sequence of seemingly random numbers, an example of the numerology that is often incorporated in their intentionally subliminal songs. There are countless internet threads dedicated to decoding the meaning from Boards of Canada’s cryptic discography, and with “Aquarius”, it’s been suggested that adding the numbers 1-36 together results in 666, hinting at a potential nod to the satanic panic of the reference era of the song and its title.¹⁶ While these interpretations are all likely instances of apophenic thinking, part of Boards of Canada’s appeal is their melding of the past and the present as well as the exchange between the explicit and the subliminal. The stylistic characteristics that make up songs like “Aquarius”, along with Boards of Canada’s mysterious and cryptic identity and messaging, would form the template for what would evolve into the genre of hauntology.

¹⁵ Simon Reynolds, “Why Boards of Canada’s *Music Has the Right to Children* Is the Greatest Psychedelic Album of the ‘90s,” *Pitchfork*, April 3, 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/why-boards-of-canadas-music-has-the-right-to-children-is-the-greatest-psychedelic-album-of-the-90s/>.

¹⁶ u/Plutonium-Lore, “r/Boardsofcanada - Conspiracy Time: What Do the Numbers in Aquarius Mean?” *Reddit*, April 23, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/boardsofcanada/comments/8ehwa9/conspiracy_time_what_do_the_numbers_in_aquarius/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

Boards of Canada, most notably within the releases put out by the quintessentially hauntological label Ghost Box, became the sonic inspiration for much of the music within the world of early hauntology due to their focus on the tampering of shared cultural memory and their use of subliminal messaging to make statements on the hyper-capitalistic dystopian society the world was rapidly approaching in the turn of the millennium era.¹⁷ Ghost Box was founded by Jim Jupp and Julian House and became rooted in much of the same investments in shared cultural memory that Boards of Canada traded in.¹⁸ Many of the artists on their roster, such as Pye Corner Audio, The Advisory Circle, The Focus Group, and Belbury Poly, share sonic similarities to Boards of Canada that would become the basis for the genre markers of hauntology. Pye Corner Audio's 2012 full-length album on Ghost Box, *Sleep Games*, incorporates a similar synth palette to Boards of Canada and resembles them at their most John Carpenter-indebted moments, described as "unsettling, out-of-date electronica."¹⁹ Pye Corner Audio's brand of ambient techno inhabits a dark and ethereal corner of Ghost Box releases by layering woozy synths and churning beats over a bed of tape hiss and a building sense of dread, most notably heard in the title track of the album. While Pye Corner Audio remains at the more strictly analog synth-based side of the roster, other acts, like The Advisory Circle, inhabit a slightly more acoustic realm exhibited on their 2008 Ghost Box debut full-length album *Other Channels*. Incorporating interludes that sound ripped right out of 1970s public broadcasts and a

¹⁷ Reynolds, "Why Boards of Canada's Music Has the Right to Children Is the Greatest Psychedelic Album of the '90s."

¹⁸ Simon Reynolds, "Hauntology: The Ghost Box Label," *Frieze*, October 2005, <http://reynoldsretro.blogspot.com/2017/10/hauntology-ghost-box-label-frieze-2005.html>.

¹⁹ George Bass, "Album Review: Pye Corner Audio - Sleep Games," *Drowned In Sound*, October 22, 2012, <https://drownedinsound.com/releases/17287/reviews/4145606>.

folk sense of pacing and instrumentation, The Advisory Circle is *The Wicker Man* to Pye Corner Audio's *Prince of Darkness*. The Ghost Box artist's use of analog equipment, an obsession with the spectrality of shared cultural memory by repurposing the soundscapes from classic public access television, library music, soundtracks, and a mixture of the bucolic with the technological – all combined to create the phantasmagoric out-of-time sensation indicative of the messaging of hauntology.²⁰

Another artist whose early output has been categorized as hauntological and often mentioned by Mark Fisher as one of the archetypes of the genre's identity is the mysterious South London electronic artist Burial. Acting almost as the urban answer to the pastoral nature of Boards of Canada, Burial's bewitching pall of crackle and hiss blanket the spectral samples within his seedy world of ambient UK garage on his first two albums, *Burial* (2006) and *Untrue* (2007). By employing the frame of UK electronic dance music genres, Burial uses atmosphere, metallic beats, and ghostly samples to build soundscapes that navigate the lonely streets of late-stage capitalism in his singular brand of dance music. In brief moments of respite, like "In McDonalds" and "Homeless", he eschews the traditional electronic beat music forms and instead focuses on ambience to evoke the isolation and sadness of contemporary urban life. In an interview with Mark Fisher for *The Wire*, Burial describes how walking around South London inspired his sound, stating, "Sometimes you get that feeling like a ghost touched your heart."²¹ This reference to sensations of being haunted by one's city elicits Derrida's depiction of the

²⁰ Jamie Sexton, "Weird Britain in Exile: Ghost Box, Hauntology, and Alternative Heritage," *Popular Music and Society* 35, no. 4 (2012): 566. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2011.608905>.

²¹ Burial, "Burial: Unedited Transcript." Interview by Mark Fisher. *The Wire Magazine*, December 2012. https://www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/interviews/burial_unedited-transcript.

Western world being similarly haunted by Marxism. It's a shadowy, cold world and Burial has created the murky soundtrack to accompany it. Much like with Boards of Canada the decade prior, Burial's style of production and keen ear for sonically manipulating space and time spawned many imitators looking to duplicate his ability to harness a sense of haunted nostalgia and emotion not often found in beat-oriented music. Burial's gloomy soundscapes were released by the influential label Hyperdub, owned by the electronic artist Kode9, real name Steve Goodman, whose impact, coupled with Fisher's assessment of these linked musical movements, was instrumental in the popularization and proliferation of hauntology as a theory and a genre, especially in the dance music world.²²

Many of these artists in this realm of hauntology share characteristics of anachronistic references, degraded sonic affectations, and personas shrouded in mystery. While for some artists, it may be simply the aesthetics of the atmosphere that create the feeling of sonic hauntological exploration, Fisher suggests the basis of hauntological music goes beyond its aesthetics and exists more as a "confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of the future."²³ Electronic music as a genre and style is so often tied to the sheen of the future, that by the time the future came to be, there was a disconnect between what was envisioned and what actually *is* the future, which resulted in a stalemate in the progressive nature of the music. The sound of the future had become an impossibility because "electronic music had succumbed to its own inertia

²² Michael Lawson, "Constant Innovation: Why Hyperdub Is in a Realm of Its Own," *Mixmag*, December 17, 2019, <https://mixmag.net/feature/constant-innovation-why-hyperdub-is-in-a-realm-of-its-own>.

²³ Mark Fisher, "What Is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16>.

and retrospection,” so it seems electronic artists, lacking innovative approaches to futurism, looked to the past to rewrite it.²⁴

Nostalgic Genre Trends: From Subreddits to the Superbowl

The pervasiveness of technology and the rabbit hole qualities of our very online lives provided an environment for genres to exploit nostalgia and cultural memory in a way that retrofitted the past to provide a ghostly look at our present. From the heady and esoteric to the cheekily pastiche, this access to shared cultural memory stimulated an experimental exploration of media from bygone times to be incorporated in intriguing ways, as evidenced in the work of these early archetypes of sonic hauntology. As technology provided instant access to art and music from bygone eras, internet communities were being built around unearthing artifacts from the past and repurposing them in new ways and there was a marked increase in the recontextualizing of older trends and styles. In the closing years of the 2000s leading into the 2010s, in the wake of economic crises, these stylistic revivals took hold in various other genres.

In a similar fashion to hauntology, chillwave, characterized by Simon Reynolds as “the American cousin to British hauntology”, harnessed nostalgia to critique the tumultuously capitalistic world in which we found ourselves.²⁵ Chillwave repurposed late 1980s bright-pastel aesthetics and scrappy lo-fi synth-pop productions with less of a focus on the heady philosophizing of hauntology and more of a focus on triggering nostalgia via samples and era-specific aesthetics. Whereas hauntology was “probably the first major trend in critical theory to have flourished online”, chillwave has been regarded as “arguably the last identifiably

²⁴ Ibid., 16

²⁵ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 345.

widespread indie DIY movement to occur [that] decade.”²⁶ Emblematic of this movement is Ernest Greene’s project Washed Out, who uses samples and reverb-drenched vocals to evoke a sense of endless summer warmth and a laidback stoner style common within the genre. Washed Out would go on to provide the opening title track to the comical hipsterdom of the show *Portlandia* with his Gary Low-sampling chillwave anthem “Feel it All Around”, which exposed his music and the genre he spearheaded to a wider audience. Other artists within this chillwave movement - sometimes also referred to as hypnagogic pop - took direct inspiration from the early hauntological work of artists like Boards of Canada. Adam Paloma’s work as Neon Indian mirrors their formula of familiarly anachronistic sensibilities in both sound and process.²⁷ By imbuing samples, vocals, and analog instruments with the texture of age, Paloma, like many of the artists in this movement, created a fascinating take on chillwave and hypnagogic pop’s repurposing of the past in inventive ways that refit it for contemporary consumption.

Another retro-focused genre was synthwave, with its adoption of the crystalline synth-based film scores of the 1970s and the 1980s. Developing throughout the early 2010s with the rise of popularity of dated forms of playback like vinyl and cassette as well as a renewed reverence for beloved synth scores like John Carpenter’s *Halloween* and Vangelis’s *Blade Runner*, this musical phenomenon was catapulted into the mainstream by Kyle Dixon and

²⁶ Andrew Gallix, “Hauntology: A Not-so-New Critical Manifestation,” *The Guardian*, June 17, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/jun/17/hauntology-critical>.; Larry Fitzmaurice, “How Chillwave’s Brief Moment in the Sun Cast a Long Shadow Over the 2010s,” *Pitchfork*, October 14, 2019, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/2010s-chillwave-best-coast-washed-out-neon-indian/>.

²⁷ Tom Murphy, “Neon Indian: ‘Around the Time I Start to Write a Record, I Stop Listening to New Music Altogether’,” *Westword*, April 9, 2012, <https://www.westword.com/music/neon-indian-around-the-time-i-start-to-write-a-record-i-stop-listening-to-new-music-altogether-5700492>.

Michael Stein's work on the Netflix series *Stranger Things*.²⁸ Due to the success of this score and the cresting wave of revitalized interest in the synth music of this era, synthwave would go on to become a pastiche style emulated within countless film and television scores and popular music. With tawdry imagery that references the bright neon-drenched retrofuturism of the 1980s and the heavy use of arpeggiated analog synths and drum machines, tweaked to fit within a turn-of-the-millennium nostalgic framework, synthwave artists mined the media from their youth that hints at the same concepts of cultural memory and lost futures explored in the world of hauntology.

As the 2010s crept towards the Trump era, vaporwave synthesized a new commentary on nostalgia and the hyper-capitalistic world around us than what hauntology, chillwave, and synthwave had navigated. This genre explored more of a comically fatalistic perspective than that of the latter genres, and rather than creating music in opposition to our toxic landscape of commodity and commercialism, vaporwave instead dug right into it.²⁹ With a cheeky synth luster and ironic nostalgia for the sonic detritus of dead malls and early-internet-age technological soundscapes and visuals, vaporwave maintained an "ambivalent refusal to commit to either celebration or critique of late capitalism's 'desire manufacturing', along with its absurdist premiss[sic] of bringing the nostalgia genres' fixation on the past up to the present day, vaporwave appeared an almost-too-perfect manifestation of Accelerationist fatalism."³⁰

²⁸ Spencer Slayton, "Grave-Digging Crate Diggers: Retro Fetishism and Fan Engagement with Horror Scores," *MUSE: UCLA Department of Musicology* 1, no. 2 (May 2020): 3, <https://uclamusclgy.github.io/MUSEVIN2.pdf>

²⁹ Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre," *Music and Letters* 98, no. 4 (2017): 636, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcx095>.

³⁰ Born and Haworth "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre," 636.

Hauntology, chillwave, synthwave, and vaporwave all represent the contemporary field of electronic music during the early 21st century. In these genres, the past is co-opted as a means of creating the present-future that was foretold during the original iterations of the stylistic touchstones they emulate and are a result of the state of the postmodern world. This arrested sense of momentum resulted in the regressive themes and style of production these genres explore.

Many of these niche genres have expanded outside of the world of blogs, Twitter threads, and subreddits and have permeated the mainstream hegemonic culture. These musical trends of the last 20 years all speak to the greater messaging of modern musical genres in an online world that all desire to emulate or incorporate sonic ideals from a different time within our own. This reinforces the foundation of hauntology as a desire to get back to *some* place to cope with our now. While memory, nostalgia, and recontextualization of old trends have been a staple in categorizing genres and their formation, due to the expansive nature of the internet, there has been an influx in looking to the past as a means of understanding and existing in our present through creation.³¹ These nostalgic trends have extended outside of niche genres and the avant-garde world and have infiltrated the pop culture landscape from film and television to pop music. Dua Lipa's Grammy Award-winning 2020 album, fittingly titled *Future Nostalgia*, incorporates threads of 80s disco and funk within her embodied contemporary pop framework. The album debuted on the Billboard top 10 alongside another nostalgia-baiting pop phenomenon, The Weeknd, whose album *After Hours* employs the crystalline synths from his collaborator and avant-garde electronic music mainstay Oneohtrix Point Never, real name Daniel Lopatin,

³¹ Jennifer C. Lena and Richard A. Peterson, "Classification as Culture: Types and Trajectories of Music Genres," *American Sociological Review* 73, no. 5 (October 2008): 699, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240807300501>; Born and Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre," 611.

reminiscent of the 80s in much of the way that synthwave artists had been doing over the last half-decade.³² The Weeknd, riding the wave of success from *After Hours*, went on to perform at the Super Bowl LV Halftime Show with Lopatin as the musical director of the event.³³ What was once the territory of niche online communities ascribing genre markers to music movements are now fully integrated into the pop landscape. These artists seek to explore the intersections of nostalgia, genre, memory, and identity within their musical output much like the progenitors of hauntology and other nostalgia-based genres had been navigating over the last 20 years.

The Caretaker

The English artist James Leyland Kirby is one of the most pivotal figures within this world of hauntology and he has exemplified these characteristics for the entirety of his musical career. Kirby has been a mainstay in experimental electronic music over the last twenty-five years under various aliases such as V/Vm and The Stranger, as well as his own name. He operated the record label V/Vm Test Records until he formed the suitably named label History Always Favours the Winners in 2009, which has been the home to most of his output since then.³⁴ In a similar fashion to what Boards of Canada had been doing in the early '90s, Kirby explored the power of cultural memory not only stylistically, but as the fundamental guiding tenet of his projects. By using a degraded, haunting, loop-based style of music, Kirby sought to

³² Keith Caulfield, "The Weeknd's 'After Hours' Spends Second Week at No. 1 on Billboard 200 Chart," *Billboard*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/chart-beat/9351457/the-weeknd-after-hours-no-1-billboard-200-chart>.

³³ Rhian Daly, "Oneohtrix Point Never Was The Weeknd's Musical Director at the Super Bowl," *NME*, February 8, 2021, https://www.nme.com/en_asia/news/music/oneohtrix-point-never-musical-director-the-weeknd-super-bowl-show-2875762.

³⁴ "History Always Favours The Winners," Discogs, Record Label, Accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.discogs.com/label/146059-History-Always-Favours-The-Winners>.

examine not only the ideals of hauntology by providing a “soundtrack of a world in decline,” but also the effects of music on the recesses of our memory.³⁵

With his aptly named The Caretaker moniker, Kirby endeavored to create repetitious soundscapes that would simultaneously act as the aural representation of degraded memory and as a symbolic aid to those suffering from debilitating degenerative diseases by repurposing old radio ballroom broadcasts to trigger memories in those who experienced this music firsthand. These methods of music-making speak directly to the major theme of musical hauntological expression; as Mark Fisher suggests, “Sonic hauntology is exercised by the problem of memory and its imperfect recovery.”³⁶ Though more of a conceptual underpinning than an applied music therapy, the messaging of The Caretaker remained focused on this investigation of the detritus of popular music history and the role that music plays on memory, recollection, grief, and death – and vice versa. While it is decidedly not uncommon for artists to explore nostalgic themes, The Caretaker’s output, much like many of the artists under the umbrella of hauntology, lies at the intersection of nostalgic genre trends and the psychology of music and memory. However, he has distilled these ideas into the very foundation of his musical identity with his The Caretaker project and created something wholly new.

The Caretaker: The Haunted Ballroom

Kirby created The Caretaker alias - the name of which is inspired by the character Jack Torrance in Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation of Stephen King’s *The Shining* - as a means of

³⁵ Leyland Kirby, “Sadly, the Future Is No Longer What It Was, by Leyland Kirby,” Bandcamp, September 1, 2009, <https://leylandkirby.bandcamp.com/album/sadly-the-future-is-no-longer-what-it-was>.

³⁶ Fisher, “The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology,” 45.

exploring the recesses of the mind and the degradation of life and memory.³⁷ His first release under this moniker was *Selected Memories From the Haunted Ballroom* (1999), part of a trilogy of albums known as the “Haunted Ballroom Trilogy”, which also contained the 2001 album *A Stairway to the Stars* and the 2003 album *We’ll All Go Riding On a Rainbow*, and was an ethereal extension of the “proto-hauntological” work under his other monikers.³⁸ Developing much of the sonic pallet that would find firm footing in his later releases, Kirby’s degraded looping of early 20th-century ballroom recordings was used to haunting effect in these early releases. While tracks from *Selected Memories From the Haunted Ballroom* like “One Thousand Memories” stretch the source material to unrecognizable and horrifying extremes, others, like “Haunt Me”, maintain some of the source’s form but drenched in reverb and echo, as if you’re hearing melodies from a distant ballroom in another time. Much like the labyrinthine hallways of The Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*, The Caretaker’s output balances both the comfort and terror of examining the recesses of one’s mind. While the exterior can appear idyllic and serene, to dig a bit deeper reveals hidden messages and horrifying secrets that the façade can only contain for so long.

Even before hauntology’s inception, Kirby exemplified the very essence of what would become sonic hauntology. In assessing the foundation of the project at the turn of the millennium, Kirby speculated that:

Maybe it was a year 2000 thing... 2000 was always the future for us. We expected something significant from that year. When it came it was just the same as it ever was

³⁷ Heather Phares, “The Caretaker: Biography & History,” *AllMusic*, Accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/the-caretaker-mn0001616287/biography>.

³⁸ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 355-356.

except we had no 2000 to look forward to anymore. It could be a psychological post-millennial hangover for us all which will take some time to pass for this generation.³⁹

In this brief exchange about the mindset he was in while creating his fledgling The Caretaker releases, Kirby articulates what would become the main theme of hauntological expressions in the coming decade, summed up succinctly in the title of his 2009 album released under his own name: *Sadly, the Future is No Longer What it Was*. While the world anxiously anticipated the explosive Y2K moment of the future to arrive with a big bang, we were instead met with a fizzle and a whimper as the world continued its postmodern march towards the global war, economic turmoil, and climate crises that face the Anthropocene era. The future is indeed not what it was, but what it is, is disappointing and dark.

The Caretaker: Amnesia

As the millennial malaise waxed on, Kirby moved on from simply using the inconsistencies of memory retrieval as a trope in his “Haunted Ballroom Trilogy” to focusing on a high-concept framing of The Caretaker’s output as an aural exercise teasing out what mental degradation in the form of illness, namely, amnesia, would actually *sound* like. His 2005 release, the aptly titled *Theoretically Pure Anterograde Amnesia*, is a sprawling web of 72 dimly lit and amorphous soundscapes “designed to be forgotten with few reference points appearing from a dense audio fog of an amnesiac condition.”⁴⁰ In songs like “Memory 11”, (all of the songs on this album are titled “Memory” in numerical order) The Caretaker uses distortion, a sparse sense of sonic isolation, industrial dread, and the unrecognizably degraded ballroom loops that have

³⁹ Reynolds, *Retromania*, 357.

⁴⁰ Leyland Kirby, “Theoretically Pure Anterograde Amnesia, by The Caretaker,” Bandcamp, May 31, 2006, <https://thecaretaker.bandcamp.com/album/theoretically-pure-anterograde-amnesia>.

become a staple in his output to ghastly effect. With this album, The Caretaker began exploring the hopelessness of the modern human condition in the throes of anterograde amnesia, a condition in which the sufferer is unable to create new memories, described as “the presence of severe and permanent deficits for the recall of recent events.”⁴¹ Kirby sought to sonically represent this condition by creating an “audio fog” that encompasses and overwhelms the listener and provides no means of orienting time and place.

In assessing The Caretaker’s shift of focus from the kitschy nostalgia of his “Haunted Ballroom” period to the more intimate and esoteric “Amnesia” period, *The Quietus*’s Jon Fletcher posited that:

The movement from the haunting allure of the music’s once “homesickness for the past” is transformed into “the impossibility of the present.” The Caretaker project becomes a hideously clear analysis of the post-modern condition - the sheer ephemerality of contemporary culture degenerating into a hopelessness - a sickness so debilitating that we forget the moment whilst it is still taking place...⁴²

By integrating this intimate exploration of the aural debilitation of inaccessible memory and the inconsistencies of its retrieval, as well as a critique of the degradation of our postmodern world, *Theoretically Pure Anterograde Amnesia* would mark a dramatic shift in The Caretaker’s focus that would be explored and expanded on with all future releases under this moniker. Taking on

⁴¹ John P. Aggleton, “EPS Mid-Career Award 2006: Understanding Anterograde Amnesia: Disconnections and Hidden Lesions,” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 61, no. 10 (2008): 1442, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470210802215335>.

⁴² Jon Fletcher, “Features: In Extremis - Jon Fletcher Gets To Grips With The Caretaker,” *The Quietus*, July 31, 2008, <https://thequietus.com/articles/00230-in-extremis-jon-fletcher-gets-to-grips-with-the-caretaker>.

this new dynamic with the themes of hauntology, The Caretaker pioneered an innovative angle for the movement entirely.

The Caretaker: *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World*

As had been characteristic of much of his early output as The Caretaker, Kirby's employment of degraded ballroom loops combined with the pessimistic messaging of the developing hauntology genre provides another layer to his explorations of the relationship between music and memory. In 2011, over a decade after the initial "Haunted Ballroom Trilogy", and half a decade after beginning his exploration of inconsistent memory recollection and mental degradation in his "Amnesia" era, The Caretaker released his seminal and most celebrated album, *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World*. This acclaimed release combined his penchant for repurposing 78 rpm recordings from artists like Layton and Johnstone, Russ Morgan and His Orchestra, and Hal Kemp and His Orchestra with the repetitious looping, haunting crackle, and sense of disorientation of his work on *Theoretically Pure Anterograde Amnesia*, while remaining much more focused on melody and just a shade brighter.

Taking cues from budding scientific studies that explored the connection between music and therapy for memory recollection, Kirby extended himself beyond the nostalgic and into the realm of the therapeutic. One such study that came out just prior to the release of *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World* in the journal *Neuropsychologia* was an article titled "Music as a Memory Enhancer in Patients With Alzheimer's Disease." This particular study explores anecdotal accounts that "describe moments of extreme lucidity in patients with severe AD (Alzheimer's Disease), often expressed as an 'awakening', in response to autobiographically salient songs."⁴³

⁴³ Simmons-Stern, Nicholas R. Simmons-Stern, Andrew E. Budson, and Brandon A. Ally, "Music as a Memory Enhancer in Patients with Alzheimer's Disease," *Neuropsychologia* 48, no. 10 (2010): 3164, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2010.04.033>.

This very phenomenon, and much of the language used in studies like this, can clearly be seen in much of The Caretaker's output from *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World* on in the way he titles tracks and selects, employs, and processes his samples. Many of the songs on *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World* are looped and degraded, sometimes dropping out suddenly only to be brought back again later in the album ("Mental Caverns Without Sunshine", with its plaintive repetitious piano chords, appears twice on *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World*), or even in some instances, affected in different ways on completely different albums, ("An Empty Bliss Beyond This World", with its twinkling and jaunty melody masked by a heavy layer of record crackles, appears twice on *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World* and makes a reoccurrence six years later on *Everywhere at the End of Time - Stage 3* (2017) with varying degrees of decay). This recapitulation of not only looped samples but his own past work within the project would be explored even further in his final releases under this moniker. This disorienting sense of loss of time, space, and self carried with it not only the theme of a disintegrating mind experiencing Alzheimer's, but the messaging of hopelessness that reflected the anxiety of navigating our modern world in the throes of global economic and climate turmoil. By not only using the comforting familiarity of these ballroom recordings but restating them throughout track sequencing and the project as a whole, he triggers the very messaging of inconsistent memory recollection that is the basis of his project and a tenet of hauntology.

The Caretaker: Titles and *Patience*

Beyond utilizing this source material as a means to explore the themes of hauntology and reinforce the degradation of memory retrieval in the mind of someone suffering from Alzheimer's, The Caretaker's song titles also offer a glimpse at the central messaging of the project. In addition to the evocative album titles, the tracks contained within also share themes of

the devastating nature of Alzheimer's disease, memory retrieval, and a lost sense of time and self. Titles like "All You Are Going to Want to Do is Get Back There", "Moments of Sufficient Lucidity", "Tiny Gradations of Loss", "Misplaced in Time", "I Still Feel As Though I Am Me" and "The Way Ahead Feels Lonely" further paint the picture of the tragedy of mental illness that can also be read as statements on hauntology's concept of lost futures and incremental historical destruction.

After the success of *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World* and before embarking on what would be his magnum opus final installments for the moniker, Kirby provided the score to Grant Gee's 2012 documentary film *Patience (After Sebald)* about the German writer W.G. Sebald. Gee sought out Kirby to perform the score, stating, "... when I was thinking of doing a short film about Sebald... I knew I wanted to use James' music. The scratches and degradation and repetition [from manipulating old 78s] worked perfectly."⁴⁴ The score itself, a step away from the signature ballroom looping exercises The Caretaker had become known for, incorporates classical piano and vocals from Franz Schubert recordings to the same haunting and heartbreaking effect.⁴⁵ The melancholic "I Have Become Almost Invisible, to Some Extent Like a Dead Man" transforms Schubert's "Der Leiermann" into a murky dirge that exemplifies the somber tone of this score. *Patience (After Sebald)* acts as a distillation of much of Kirby's previous work, incorporating the dark drone sensibilities utilized in his other monikers with the melodic loops, masked with a heavy layer of hiss and crackle, that characterize his work as The

⁴⁴ Damon Smith, "Grant Gee, *Patience (After Sebald)*," *Filmmaker Magazine*, May 9, 2012, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/45517-grant-gee-patience-after-sebald/#.YDw26pNKiRt>.

⁴⁵ "The Caretaker: *Patience (After Sebald)*," Review, *Fact Magazine*, March 1, 2012, <https://www.factmag.com/2012/03/01/the-caretaker-patience-after-sebald/>.

Caretaker. This score was a critical success and presaged the next, and final, chapter of his output as The Caretaker.

The Death of The Caretaker

After a brief period of inactivity, in 2016, Kirby returned with an announcement regarding his plans for the future of The Caretaker. Over the next 3 years, he would release a series of 6 albums entitled *Everywhere at the End of Time (Stages 1-6)* which would culminate in the death of The Caretaker character and the moniker itself. In an interview with *The Quietus*'s John Doran, Kirby discussed his plans for The Caretaker, plainly stating, "I think I'm coming to the end of The Caretaker... My final idea has been to give the whole project dementia."⁴⁶ By "diagnosing" The Caretaker with dementia, Kirby sought to bring the project to its final resting place by investigating all of the themes of memory and its diaphanously inconsistent retrieval that he had spent the last two decades exploring from the inside. In a statement announcing the concept of this final release sequence, Kirby explained:

'Everywhere at the end of time' is a new and finite series exploring dementia, its advance and its totality. Each stage will reveal new points of progression, loss and disintegration. Progressively falling further and further towards the abyss of complete memory loss and nothingness. Viewing dementia as a series of stages can be a useful way to understand the illness, but it is important to realise that this only provides a rough guide to the progress of the condition. Drawing on a recorded history of 20 years of recollected memories this

⁴⁶ Leyland James Kirby, "Features: A Quietus Interview: Out Of Time: Leyland James Kirby And The Death Of A Caretaker," Interview by John Doran, *The Quietus*, September 22, 2016, <https://thequietus.com/articles/20970-leyland-james-kirby-interview-the-caretaker>.

is one final journey and study into recreating the progression of dementia through sound.⁴⁷

These releases were a distillation of all Kirby's work from the last 20 years and unraveled unlike anything he had released prior, resulting in some of the most gorgeous, heartbreaking, horrifying, and thematically rich music of his career.

Each stage in *Everywhere at the End of Time* goes beyond the sonic representations of therapeutic exercises in memory retrieval explored in his previous albums, and instead, presents the unfolding process from the position of actually suffering from the disease. Kirby's The Caretaker project had officially shifted from a passive examination of aural sympathy to an empathetic exploration of the experience of mental degradation. All 6 stages of this release sequence are accompanied by a statement of the condition's worsening symptoms that reflect the soundscapes contained within. We can hear the journey through the mental caverns of dementia from the early stages of the project, *Everywhere at the End of Time: Stages 1-3*, described as "the first signs of memory loss... like a beautiful daydream."⁴⁸ These early stages are reminiscent of his more accessible work on *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World*, with songs retaining the form and shape of his ballroom looping experiments. These stages are presented as traditional album formats, with discernible tracks that exist distinct from one another, albeit with an increasingly decayed pallor as the stages go on. The later stages, however, designated as the "Post-Awareness" stages, eschew any recognizable song form, with each soundscape encompassing an

⁴⁷ Matthew Strauss, "James Leyland Kirby Gives 'The Caretaker' Alias Dementia, Releases First of Final 6 Albums," *Pitchfork*, June 2, 2017, https://pitchfork.com/news/68472-james-leyland-kirby-gives-the-caretaker-alias-dementia-releases-first-of-final-6-albums/?mbid=social_twitter.

⁴⁸ "Everywhere at the End of Time, by The Caretaker," Bandcamp, September 22, 2016, <https://thecaretaker.bandcamp.com/album/everywhere-at-the-end-of-time>.

entire side of an album. These later albums, *Everywhere at the End of Time: Stages 4-6* are described as existing “... where serenity and the ability to recall singular memories gives way to confusions and horror” in which the songs devolve to terrifying, cacophonous amalgamations of barely discernible recitations of all of The Caretakers previous output.⁴⁹ Resembling the sound of scrambled radio frequencies mixed with the hiss and crackle of a turntable on the fritz, these final sequences offer a nightmarish aural depiction of a mind fractured by mental illness. The project culminates in a bleak and heart-wrenching dark ambient drone leading up to the final euphoric moments of *Stage 6*, “Place in the World Fades Away”, which recapitulates the angelic song “Friends Past Re-united”, one of his earliest releases under the moniker, bringing The Caretaker’s hauntological explorations of mental degradation to a gorgeously poignant and satisfying close.

Upon completion of the *Everywhere at the End of Time* stages, and as a final parting gift to those who had followed through the stages of illness and ultimate death of The Caretaker, Kirby released his final coda in 2019 as The Caretaker, *Everywhere, an Empty Bliss*. The title of this release makes explicit reference, both textually and stylistically, to The Caretaker’s most renowned release, *An Empty Bliss Beyond This World*, and acts almost as a sound collage greatest hits album. *Everywhere, an Empty Bliss* was released with this statement that rings true to the hauntological themes of lost futures explored by Kirby and the hauntology genre at large: “In celebration of its completion... here is a surprise golden farewell... Offering you one last chance to raise a charged glass for those we lost along the way, for all the works, for those ghosts

⁴⁹ Ibid.

from our past, for our uncertain future and for The Caretaker.”⁵⁰ Closing out this final farewell statement with a cheeky reference to the namesake of the project, Kirby welcomes the listener to buy him a drink and offers a revised quote from *The Shining*: “As the old saying goes ‘I’m the type of guy who likes to know who’s buying their drinks, Lloyd.’”⁵¹ By teasing out the philosophical and musical underpinnings of the genre of hauntology, Kirby evolved The Caretaker project into an exploration of the fragile nature of human memory by exploring the sonics of mental illness from the outside as a therapeutic tool and the inside as a thematic aural device, traversing powerful and uncharted territory in the world of hauntology.

Collaboration: Ivan Seal and the Art of Hauntology

The wisps of Derrida’s and Fisher’s assessments of hauntology extend beyond socio-economic theory and musical genres. Whether through the recontextualization of collage art or the prevalence of politically observant memes featuring childhood cartoons, there is a longing for repurposing the past in captivating ways beyond the sonic. Visually, hauntology can take many forms, but in the case of The Caretaker, one of his main collaborators has been with the Berlin-based artist Ivan Seal, whose haunting oil paintings have graced the covers of most of Kirby’s releases under this moniker. These cover images, just like the songs that they adorn, are simple still life paintings that land slightly askew to the viewer’s idea of ordinary. In the way that sonic hauntology repurposes the past to create something reminiscent but ultimately wholly new and disjointed with time and space, Seal’s work takes the art form of still life and sculpture and twists it into something singular. The pastel backgrounds of Seal’s paintings provide a calm environment for the twisted surreal scrapes of oil paint that compose evocatively unintelligible

⁵⁰ “Everywhere, an Empty Bliss, by The Caretaker,” Bandcamp, February 26, 2019, <https://thecaretaker.bandcamp.com/>.

⁵¹ Ibid,

images; a simple grey sphere with an unlit match; an unrecognizable bust, dented and damaged with time; a vase filled with flowers both alive and dead, depending on the angle you view them. These dreamlike images haunt the canvases they inhabit, much like Kirby's degraded loops haunt the ballrooms of our minds.

In staying true to hauntology's themes of inconsistent memory retrieval explored in depth by *The Caretaker*, Seal's method for these still life images relies heavily on memory as opposed to reference material. This process provides room for internal interpretation to take hold and transform the very real into something surreal, or as Seal puts it "If you put the original event next to the memory, they'd be totally different. And I love this noise in-between... And trying to put it down somehow, or trick time somehow by activating it, and I find this noise, this glitch, has countless potentials and paintings in it."⁵² Seal's methods and the gorgeous pieces that come from them reflect the ideals of hauntology in their unconventional interpretation of a simple past in a complicated present – creating something mysterious and beautiful from something mundane by way of the glitches in memory. This noise in-between is the place in which hauntology finds its potency. Mirroring the sentiments of *The Caretaker*, in discussing the influence of our inconsistent memory on his work, Seal posits that it's "Like a loop. It's about what you can do with that and how you pervert it."⁵³ This perversion of memory is the crux of hauntology, sonically and artistically.

In the Spring of 2019, Ivan Seal and Leyland Kirby collaborated on a gallery showing at FRAC Auvergne in Clermont-Ferrand, France that was a celebration of the release of the final

⁵² Ivan Seal, "The Noise In-Between: An Interview With Ivan Seal," Interview by Declan Tan, *The Quietus*, March 10, 2018, <https://thequietus.com/articles/24144-ivan-seal-interview>.

⁵³ Seal, "The Noise In-Between: An Interview With Ivan Seal."

stage of *Everywhere at the End of Time* and the “death” of The Caretaker moniker. Bridging the worlds of these two artists, this showing offered a way to experience Seal’s artwork and Kirby’s music in one space to witness the ways they “engage in a common reflection on the question of memory, its wanderings, its vacillations, its dysfunctions.”⁵⁴ Ivan Seal’s artwork was compiled into a limited edition 162-page book that included a collection of original pieces along with his work with The Caretaker. This artbook was bundled with a CD of The Caretaker’s parting gift album *Everywhere, an Empty Bliss* – the only physical release the album would receive and the title of this celebratory exhibition.

Hauntology Today: TikTok and Deep Nostalgia

Outside of music and art, in the corners of the internet, on Tumblr and Twitter and TikTok, we see these spectral explorations of hauntological ideals taking place today. The rising popularity of aesthetic-based identifiers, like “cottagecore” and “countrycore”, further explores the cultural obsession with the romanticization of the pastoral with a comforting aesthetic to ease the uncertainty of the present with the nostalgic desire to get back to *some* place and time other than our own.⁵⁵ The prevalence of internet urban legends and ghost stories, sometimes referred to as “creepypasta” can even be ascribed a hauntological perspective, as they exist within a Derridean “virtual realm of phantoms.”⁵⁶ Many visual artists have begun exploring these philosophies in the use of liminal spaces and the disorientation that these non-places can cause –

⁵⁴ “Ivan Seal / The Caretaker – Everywhere, an Empty Bliss,” *FRAC Auvergne*, April 6, 2019, <https://www.frac-auvergne.fr/exposition/ivan-seal-the-caretaker-everywhere-an-empty-bliss/>.

⁵⁵ Kate Reggev, “What Exactly Is Cottagecore and How Did It Get So Popular?” *Architectural Digest*, October 21, 2020, <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/what-exactly-is-cottagecore>.

⁵⁶ Line Henriksen, “‘Spread the Word’: Creepypasta, Hauntology, and an Ethics of the Curse,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2018): 274, <https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.87.1.266>.

in the same ways that The Caretaker utilized haunting loops to trigger a sense of unease via temporal displacement.⁵⁷ Even further, in the dying throes of our late-stage capitalist society, many major brands reach into the past to harness this sensation of out-of-time, or as they will market it “timeless”, by rebranding their products or companies with classic minimalist styles, such as Burger King’s recent rebranding to their retro 70s style packaging that they described as “playfully irreverent.”⁵⁸ From music, to art, to internet communities, to branding, we are consistently haunted by the past to make meaning out of our present.

Beyond these relatively innocuous explorations of the past by internet communities and major corporations, there are the troubling recent developments in AI that have the potential to open up a Pandora’s Box of horrific outcomes. The online genealogical tracing website MyHeritage recently unveiled their new project, intended to allow the user to “Experience your family history like never before!” and titled in an almost comically on the nose fashion as “Deep Nostalgia.”⁵⁹ This new development uses AI to bring to life old images, taking a route right through the uncanny valley to bring the past into the present unlike anything hauntology could have imagined. By uploading old images of family members, you can bring them to life in frighteningly realistic detail. Fortunately, for now, the automated software is limited to just the face and head, but the potential for abuse is clear. In our age of misinformation, doctored images and deep fakes have the potential power to incite radicalized uprisings, upend democratic

⁵⁷ Julia Thomas, “Understanding How Liminal Space Is Different From Other Places,” *Better Help*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/general/understanding-how-liminal-space-is-different-from-other-places/>.

⁵⁸ Tom Ravenscroft, “Burger King Reveals Simplified Logo as Part of First Rebrand in 20 Years,” *Dezeen*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.dezeen.com/2021/01/09/burger-king-logo-rebrand-jones-knowles-ritchie/>.

⁵⁹ “MyHeritage Deep Nostalgia™, Deep Learning Technology to Animate the Faces in Still Family Photos,” MyHeritage, Accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.myheritage.com/deep-nostalgia>.

institutions, or even start wars.⁶⁰ This type of technology, while intended to be sentimental and heartfelt, if unchecked, could further damage our already tenuous relationship with reality and spell the true end of history as we know it.

These interactions between the past and the present, from the innocent to the potentially terrifying, are more directly explored with a recent trend on TikTok, the app that Pitchfork writer Grayson Haver Currin referred to as “our most expedient avenue for distilling life’s complexities into something resembling a commercial.”⁶¹ Hauntology and The Caretaker’s repurposing of the past and explorations of the cavernous qualities of memory and degradation were incidentally repurposed by the next generation in the form of a TikTok challenge that would likely cause both Derrida and Fisher to turn in their graves. This challenge saw Gen Z’ers “hunker down with six hours of weird ambient music” attempting to endure the full sequence of The Caretakers demise in *Everywhere at the End of Time (Stages 1-6)*.⁶² By taking this challenge as a means of surmounting the horrors of a lost mind leading to a lost life (or moniker, rather), these TikTokers took what Kirby had been exploring for decades and reduced it to a campfire dare. When retiring his moniker in 2019, The Caretaker became a cultural ghost himself, left to haunt the corners of the internet in strange challenges of empathy and mental endurance.⁶³

Beyond these contemporary intersections with TikTok challenges, aesthetic internet communities, and deep fakes, hauntology is still very much present in the musical world, with

⁶⁰Oscar Schwartz, “You Thought Fake News Was Bad? Deep Fakes Are Where Truth Goes to Die,” *The Guardian*, November 12, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/nov/12/deep-fakes-fake-news-truth>.

⁶¹ Grayson Haver Currin, “Nathan Salsburg: Landwerk/Landwerk No. 2,” *Pitchfork*, January 2, 2021, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/nathan-salsburg-landwerk/>.

⁶² Meaghan Garvey, “What Happens When TikTok Looks To The Avant-Garde For A Challenge?” *NPR*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/10/22/926607585/tiktok-the-caretaker-challenge-avant-garde>.

⁶³ Ibid.

artists creating works that reference not only the wide umbrella of hauntological concepts, but Kirby's work as *The Caretaker* directly. The guitarist Nathan Salsburg, in describing the process of creating his wonderfully introspective sample-laden, guitar-based albums from 2020, *Landwerk No. 1* and *Landwerk No. 2*, stated, "The Caretaker's "An Empty Bliss Beyond This World" -- the most emotionally effective re-use of 78-rpm records I likely could have imagined. That album nudged me to attempt a similar approach, locating melodic fragments on 78s that could serve as bases for new compositions."⁶⁴ As evidenced in the statement for Salsburg's gorgeous new albums, the potency of *The Caretaker*'s output is still very much present in the wake of his "demise" – his legacy is inspiring a new generation of musicians to retrofit the past.

Additionally, experimental electronic artist and film composer Daniel Lopatin (*Oneohtrix Point Never*) has seen his influence grow exponentially over the last decade. On the tails of his critically acclaimed scores to the Safdie Brother's incendiary films *Good Time* (2017) and *Uncut Gems* (2019), as well as his production work on The Weeknd's *After Hours*, Lopatin released his newest album, recorded during lockdown in 2020, *Magic Oneohtrix Point Never*, to critical acclaim. One reviewer, who invokes comparisons to *The Caretaker* and espouses hauntological language, describes the album as "haunted by the ghosts of records past."⁶⁵ It is clear that hauntology, whether in the form of internet trends, artistic interpretations, socio-political discourse, or music, is still thriving and its instigating of the past in our sordid present is still rich for exploration.

Anti-Hauntology: Found Futures

⁶⁴ Nathan Salsburg, "Landwerk, by Nathan Salsburg," Bandcamp, May 1, 2020, <https://nathansalsburg.bandcamp.com/album/landwerk>

⁶⁵ Ben Cohn, "Oneohtrix Point Never: Magic Oneohtrix Point Never," *Treble*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.treblezine.com/oneohtrix-point-never-magic-review/>.

While much of this paper has discussed the loss of future and the inability for electronic music acts to establish a futuristic trajectory, there has been a growing trend in subverting these referential and nostalgia-based threads of contemporary electronic music. As established by Fisher, Derrida, and the many artists who explore hauntology's themes, the collective ability to see a future is dampened by the chaotic present we find ourselves, and our past will seemingly always haunt us. However, there has been a rising new class of experimental electronic artists forging a fresh path that defies the restraints placed on once forward-thinking musical movements. Yet, many of the figures in this era are not immune to the nostalgic underpinnings of music-making and simply repurpose the chewed bubble gum and plasticity of the turn-of-the-millennium American popular music landscape, albeit with a hyperkinetic sheen. This is evidenced in the rising popularity of hyperpop artists like 100 Gecs and even more directly with the recent 10th-anniversary remix of Rebecca Black's infamous single "Friday", which features Dorian Electra, Big Freedia, and 3OH!3 and is produced by Dylan Brady, half of 100 Gecs. Upon the release of this remix single, self-proclaimed "PhD Researcher in Human Rights, austerity, and neoliberalism [and] ideological fuckboi," John Duncan, humorously and succinctly tweeted the music video with the caption "This is hauntology," confirming the perpetually haunted landscape of contemporary electronic music even for fledgling genres like hyperpop.⁶⁶

Despite the popularity and prevalence of contemporary music maintaining the guise of futurism in nostalgic clothing, some artists, like the late SOPHIE, have drawn a new figure into the stagnant electronic music landscape. SOPHIE consistently subverted the norms of what music can sound like and shaped otherworldly and futuristic soundscapes that propelled pop and

⁶⁶ John Duncan, "This Is Hauntology," Twitter, February 10, 2021, <https://twitter.com/Johntheduncan/status/1359622592215347207>.

electronic music into the unknown. Matt Bluemink, in his piece “Anti-Hauntology: Mark Fisher, SOPHIE, and the Music of the Future”, compiles compelling evidence of a growing trend of musicians defying the trajectory (or lack thereof) that Fisher had established in his work around hauntology. “One of Fisher’s damning critiques of contemporary culture is that even electronic music, once the bastion of the progressive, has gotten lost in a hauntological past.”⁶⁷ This assessment of Fisher’s does remain true within much of electronic music, as evidenced in Duncan’s comically observant tweet. However, SOPHIE subverts musical conventions by stretching her instruments and techniques to lengths previously unheard, eschewing not only the boundaries of sound but identity and gender as well. Through solo output as well as her work alongside artists who run the gamut of mainstream and underground pop, such as Madonna, Charli XCX, FKA Twigs, Let’s Eat Grandma, and Shygirl, SOPHIE established a novel contemporary sonic language that defies the always-already tenets of hauntological thinking that refuses to “dwell on the past.”⁶⁸

It is clear that hauntology and The Caretaker’s exploration of hauntological themes are still very much present in the contemporary music landscape. There is seemingly no escaping the principles and sounds of hauntology’s relationship with memory, nostalgia, and the degradation of life and mind. The specters of our past shroud us, and in the midst of a global pandemic, exponential economic turmoil, and extreme civil unrest, the instigation of hauntology is as potent now as ever. In assessing the cultural significance of Kode9’s label Hyperdub, the home of hauntology heavyweight Burial, DJ Mag’s Gabriel Szatan prophetically suggests, “If the theory

⁶⁷ Matt Bluemink, “Anti-Hauntology: Mark Fisher, SOPHIE, and the Music of the Future,” *Blue Labyrinths*, February 27, 2021, <https://bluelabyrinths.com/2021/02/02/anti-hauntology-mark-fisher-sophie-and-the-music-of-the-future/>.

⁶⁸ Matt Bluemink, “Anti-Hauntology: Mark Fisher, SOPHIE, and the Music of the Future.”

of hauntology has taught us anything, it is that the future we wish for may never materialise. Better to construct the present you want while you have the agency to do so.”⁶⁹ The end is no longer nigh. The end is now, and we are hearing it unfold in the sonic world around us.

⁶⁹ Gabriel Szatan, “Hyperdub: Another Future Is Possible,” *DJMag*, August 20, 2019, <https://djmag.com/longreads/hyperdub-another-future-possible>.

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