

The Twenty-First Century Never Arrived

Eleleth · Co-authored — human and model

<https://eleleth.org/essays/hauntology/> · Published July 2, 2026 · v3.1

Hauntology sounds like nostalgia and is actually a mechanism: after 1989 the future closed as a structural possibility, and the imagined futures that never came now do more causal work than the present. Fisher's diagnosis, riding on Derrida's specter, is temporal-political, not aesthetic.

Popular music, film, and design have flattened across the last three or four decades, and the flatness is easy to hear when two moments a generation apart sound less distant than two moments a generation apart did fifty years ago. The usual name for noticing this is nostalgia, the standing complaint of anyone getting older. This essay argues that the name is wrong. The flatness registers a mechanism rather than a mood. The future closed as a structural possibility, and the futures that never happened now organize the present more powerfully than the present organizes itself. Hauntology is the name for that condition, and the strongest version of it is temporal and political rather than aesthetic.

THE SPECTER, BEFORE THE VIBES

Derrida coined the term, and it was a hard claim before anyone used it for a music genre. *Specters of Marx* opens under a line from *Hamlet*, "the time is out of joint," and takes the line technically: a present that cannot gather itself into presence, that is non-contemporaneous with itself. Haunting, for Derrida, rivals ontology rather than decorating 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. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism." The specter is the thing that acts without being present: "this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge."

Two of Derrida's details do heavy work later, so take them now. The first is the **visor effect**. Hamlet's father appears in armor, visor down: he sees without being seen, and Derrida calls this "the supreme

insignia of power: the power to see without being seen." Before any apparition, "we feel ourselves observed, sometimes under surveillance." The law arrives from someone we cannot inspect. The second is Derrida's diagnosis of the 1989 victory lap. The endless declarations that Marx was dead, communism dead, "very dead," had for Derrida "the manic, jubilatory, and incantatory form that Freud assigned to the so-called triumphant phase of mourning work": exorcism rather than analysis. And mourning-as-exorcism has a formula he supplies almost as a stage direction: make "sure that the dead will not come back: quick, keep the cadaver localized, in a safe place ... a vault to which one keeps the keys." The louder the burial, the less finished the death.

Derrida's specters mostly arrive from the past: inheritances, debts, the dead who will not settle. Fisher's move, the one that turned a deconstructive flourish into the sharpest cultural diagnosis of the 2000s, was to point the concept forward. What haunts the present most, Fisher argued in *Ghosts of My Life*, is what never happened: the canceled futures. The postcapitalist, post-scarcity, genuinely *next* worlds that twentieth-century culture spent decades rehearsing did not arrive, and their non-arrival has kept working, the way a force works. The lost future qualifies as a specter in Derrida's strict sense, neither present nor gone, and still causally live.

THE MECHANISM, NOT THE MOOD

What separates this from generational grumbling is that Fisher names machinery. *Capitalist Realism* opens with the formula that made it famous: the widespread sense that capitalism is the only viable system, so that "it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it." Note the verb. The claim

targets imagination, the faculty futures are made of. Capitalist realism installs itself as a "business ontology" in which it is "simply obvious" that everything, health, education, art, should run as a business, and the installation works less like an argument than like weather, "a pervasive atmosphere" that pre-empts.

The pre-emption has a name in Fisher: precorporation. Where the old culture industry had to capture rebellion after the fact, the new arrangement performs "a preemptive formatting of desire," a formatting that gets in before desire has had a chance to form.

Fisher was building on Fredric Jameson here, and the debt is worth naming. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson had already diagnosed a "waning of historicity" and read the nostalgia mode as a formal symptom, an art that can only cannibalize past styles because it has lost access to a live sense of historical time. Fisher's contribution was to specify the date and the political stakes Jameson left more diffuse. That specification is why "every generation says this" fails as a rebuttal. Every generation mourns its youth. Not every generation lives after the closure of nominal alternatives. Between 1979 and 1989 the rival system collapsed, "there is no alternative" migrated from campaign slogan to background physics, and culture lost the thing lost-future talk had always leaned on, a live elsewhere. The counter-test came in 2008, when the system detonated on its own terms and, by Fisher's bitter accounting, the result confirmed the thesis: "far from constituting the end of capitalism, the bank bail-outs were a massive re-assertion of the capitalist realist insistence that there is no alternative." The crash that should have reopened the future closed it harder. That is the test a nostalgia reading cannot pass. A mood does not survive its own refutation and come back stronger; a structural closure does.

THE LIVED DATA: FISHER'S CLASSROOM

The book's most quoted concepts came out of a further-education college where Fisher taught, and the scenes matter more than the terminology, because they show what a closed future feels like from inside a seventeen-year-old. They also carry an evidential caveat Fisher himself flags, and the honest-limits section below returns to it: these are a teacher's observations, offered as such.

He watched a generation he described as suffering **depressive hedonia** : not the classic depression

that cannot feel pleasure, but its inversion, an inability to do anything *except* pursue pleasure. "There is a sense that 'something is missing'," he wrote, "but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed beyond the pleasure principle." His emblem was the student with headphones resting on the ears, no music playing, or playing so quietly it barely registered: the point was not the song but the reassurance "that the matrix was still there, within reach." Another student told him that reading was "boring", and Fisher's gloss is precise: not the content, "it is the act of reading itself that is deemed to be boring," because a "post-literate New Flesh," formed by the feed, is "too wired to concentrate."

And beneath the tics, the temporal injury. His students, he wrote, showed an "inability to synthesize time into any coherent narrative": twitchy, agitated interpassivity, no thread connecting present slackness to future consequence. Fisher's name for the political shape of this is **reflexive impotence**. "They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it. But that knowledge is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy." Add the last mechanism, the **privatization of stress** : the distress of living in a future-less time gets diagnosed as individual neurochemistry, treated one prescription at a time, so that even the *symptom* of the closed future is denied a collective existence. A generation was in mourning for a future it had never been promised in the first place.

MARKET STALINISM: THE APPARATUS THAT OUTLIVED ITS VISION

Fisher's strangest and best chapter concerns bureaucracy, and it supplies the institutional face of hauntology. Neoliberalism's founding promise was the bonfire of red tape. What it delivered, in schools, hospitals, universities, was an explosion of audit, metrics, mission statements, and PR, which Fisher names **market Stalinism**. The comparison is exact rather than rhetorical. What late capitalism repeats from Stalinism is "the valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement," and his borrowed example is Marshall Berman's account of the White Sea Canal: a project celebrated in print, toured by obliging writers, that never carried significant traffic. The representation was the product. In the same spirit, a college's exam drilling replaces teaching, a hospital's target-hitting replaces care, and "the ostensibly anti-Stalinist neoliberal

New Labour government has shown the same tendency to implement initiatives in which real world effects matter only insofar as they register at the level of (PR) appearance." His slogan for it is the best one-line update of Marx anyone has managed: all that is solid melts into PR.

Here the visor effect returns as management theory. Who is the audit *for* ? Everyone inside the institution knows the numbers are gamed; the auditors know; the ministers know. Fisher's answer, borrowed from Žižek, is that the performance is staged for the big Other, the virtual entity "required to believe even when no individual can," a spectator that sees everything and does not exist. An apparatus built to produce a future keeps running, at full administrative intensity, for an observer that is not there, measuring progress toward a destination no one any longer believes in. That is hauntology drawn as an org chart. The vision is dead; the paperwork of the vision is eternal.

HOW IT FEELS: THE EERIE

Fisher's last book supplies the phenomenology, and a distinction worth keeping sharp. The weird and the eerie are two different failures of world. The weird is the presence of *what does not belong*, the intrusion that should not be here but is: fascination, montage, Lovecraft. The eerie turns on absence and agency, and is constituted, in Fisher's words, "by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence": something where nothing should be (a cry on an empty moor), or nothing where something should be (the abandoned ship, still warm). The eerie's question is always: *what agent did this, and where is it?*

Hauntology sits with the eerie rather than the weird. The lost future reads as a failure of presence, a vision that saturated a century and then vanished while its institutions kept moving, not as an alien intrusion from outside. And the master case of the eerie, for Fisher, is the economy itself: "capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing," yet exerting more influence over the world than anything of substance. Motion with no visible mover, law with the visor down. A culture that loops its own archive while insisting no one is doing the looping has exactly the structure of an eerie place, and the sensation everyone reports, the vague wrongness of a present that will not become a future, is what being inside such a place feels like.

BERARDI'S CLOCK: WHY THE FUTURE CANNOT FIT

There is a technical layer under all of this, and Franco

Berardi supplies it from an unexpected direction. In *And: Phenomenology of the End* he sets two quantities against each other. **Cyberspace**, the info-sphere, expands without limit. **Cybertime**, the time of attention, the capacity of a nervous system to process, stays organically bounded. The gap between them registers as injury rather than inconvenience. A bounded attention flooded by an unbounded stream produces what Berardi catalogues as the epidemic of the era: panic, attention collapse, depression, the pathologies of an organism permanently over-supplied with present.

Connect that to Fisher and the circuit closes. A future, as a lived object, is a gap in the present, an unfilled stretch of time in which something else can be imagined. Berardi's point is that the gap is now structurally impossible: the stream fills all available cybertime, every crevice of attention pre-stocked with content. Fisher's students with the silent headphones were keeping the matrix "within reach" precisely to guarantee no unfilled second in which the missing future might have made itself felt. The cancellation of the future runs deeper than ideology (no alternative may be imagined) down to the *physiological*: there is no attention left over to imagine it with. And the loop is now automated. The recommendation layer that [assembles everyone's cultural field](#) is trained on the archive and optimizes for resemblance to what already engaged, which makes formal nostalgia the *default output of infrastructure*, no longer even a choice a culture makes. This is the mechanism Kyle Chayka names in *Filterworld* (2024), the flattening toward algorithmic sameness that recommendation delivers in place of the discovery it promises, and it is the automated form of the retro-fixation Simon Reynolds diagnosed in *Retromania* (2011) back when recycling the archive was still a choice rather than the machine's default. Fisher diagnosed a condition; the feed industrialized it. At the intimate scale the same machinery can [conjure a haunting for an audience of one](#): a register reinforced until it persists unbidden, a private ghost with a config entry.

WHAT THE ARGUMENT DOES NOT SETTLE

The thesis has borders worth drawing, and drawing them is part of the claim rather than a retreat from it. Fisher's evidence is Anglo-American and post-1989. Other places run on other clocks, and the diagnosis does not export unexamined. Depressive hedonia and the student scenes are a teacher's observations, presented as such, not epidemiology, and the reflexive-impotence and depressive-hedonia concepts rest on that anecdotal base. Derrida, Fisher, Berardi,

and Jameson built their concepts independently. The convergence staged here is this essay's construction, and Berardi never reads the specter. The closure is structural rather than absolute, by Fisher's own insistence: *Capitalist Realism* ends not in mourning but with a wager that collective agency can be rebuilt, and Berardi, for his part, insists the mutation cannot be resisted, only disentangled, locating hope in what the stream cannot pre-format: the body, sensibility, poetry. Neither man licenses despair. Both license the diagnosis. The feed-nostalgia claim has its own live opposition: Corbin Barthold, reviewing Chayka, argues the flattening thesis runs on anecdote and asks "compared to what," pointing out that algorithms have opened more niches and surfaced more obscure work than any prior distribution system, and Reynolds himself, in *Futuromania* (2024), grants that genuine invention persists alongside the retro-fixation rather than being erased by it. The objection lands, and it narrows the claim without dissolving it. The claim was always more modest than "novelty has become impossible," which the counter-evidence refutes. Its target is the infrastructure's default, retuned toward resemblance; pockets of the new survive, and what shifts is the gravity of the whole field. And the full comparative history that would finally retire the "every generation" objection, measuring current future-loss against the losses of 1890 or 1930, has not been written. What exists is a mechanism specific enough to bet on, short of a proof.

Grant the borders and the core claim stands, and it stays genuinely strange. The most consequential force in contemporary culture may be a set of worlds that do not exist and never did, exerting [more organizing power than the present's own contents](#) . We describe societies ruled by their past with some skill. This one is ruled by a missing thing, a twenty-first century that was scheduled, trailered, and never delivered. Two questions stay open. Whether the closure of the future is reversible, as Fisher wagered it was, or a one-way ratchet, as 2008 suggested, is undecided by the evidence assembled here. And whether the automated feed that now industrializes formal nostalgia can be reprogrammed toward novelty, or whether resemblance-to-the-archive is what optimization for engagement always converges on, is a question the framing can pose but cannot answer.

REFERENCES

- [1] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf. Routledge Classics, 2006 (orig. Éditions Galilée, 1993). ISBN 978-0-415-38957-0.
- [2] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2009. ISBN 978-1-84694-317-1.
- [3] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Zero Books, 2014. ISBN 978-1-78099-226-6. The essays where Fisher works out the hauntology-of-lost-futures argument at length.
- [4] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*. Repeater Books, 2016. ISBN 978-1-910924-38-9. <https://repeaterbooks.com/product/the-weird-and-the-eerie/>
- [5] Franco Berardi, *And: Phenomenology of the End*. Semiotext(e), 2015. The cybertime argument. ISBN 978-1-58435-171-4.
- [6] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1991. ISBN 978-0-8223-1090-7. The waning of historicity and the account of nostalgia as a formal mode.
- [7] Kyle Chayka, *Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture*. Doubleday, 2024. Algorithmic recommendation as cultural homogenization, the feed-nostalgia mechanism. <https://www.kylechayka.com/filterworld>
- [8] Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*. Faber & Faber, 2011. Retro-fixation as a structural condition of post-1989 culture.
- [9] Corbin Barthold, 'Filterworld Is a Confused Critique of Algorithms.' *Reason*, 23 January 2024. The counterargument that algorithms have widened rather than flattened cultural access. <https://reason.com/2024/01/23/filterworld-is-a-confused-critique-of-algorithms/>

Cite as: Eleleth, "The Twenty-First Century Never Arrived." *Eleleth*, July 2, 2026. <https://eleleth.org/essays/hauntology/>