

# WHAT IS HAUNTOLOGY?

Mark Fisher

The concept of hauntology gained its second (un)life in the middle of the last decade. Critics were prompted to reach for the term again by a confluence of musical artists—Philip Jeck, Burial, the Ghost Box label, the Caretaker. Their work sounded “ghostly,” certainly, but the spectral-ity was not a mere question of atmospherics. What defined this “hauntological” confluence more than anything else was its confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of the future. By 2005 or so, it was becoming clear that electronic music could no longer deliver sounds that were “futuristic.” From the end of World War II up until the 1990s, electronic music—whether produced by high-culture composers such as Pierre Schaeffer or Karlheinz Stockhausen or by synthpop groups and dance-music producers—had been synonymous with a sense of the future, so much so that film and television would habitually turn to electronic music when it wanted to invoke the future. But by 2005, electronica was no longer capable of evoking a future that felt strange or dissonant. If electronic music was “futuristic,” it was in the same sense that fonts are “gothic”—the futuristic now connoted a settled set of concepts, affects, and associations. Twenty-first-century electronic music had failed to progress beyond what had been recorded in the twentieth century: practically anything produced in the 2000s could have been recorded in the 1990s. Electronic music had succumbed to its own inertia and retrospection. It was also clear that this was more than a moment in a familiar pattern, in which, as one genre wanes, another emerges to take its place at the leading edge of innovation. There was no leading edge of innovation any more. In music, as elsewhere in culture, we were living, in Franco Berardi’s suggestive phrase, after the future.

What haunts the digital cul-de-sacs of the twenty-first century is not so much the past as all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate. The futures



**Handsworth Songs** Courtesy of Smoking Dogs Films.

that have been lost were more than a matter of musical style. More broadly, and more troublingly, the disappearance of the future meant the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live. It meant the acceptance of a situation in which culture would continue without really changing, and where politics was reduced to the administration of an already established (capitalist) system. In other words, we were in the “end of history” described by Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama’s thesis was the other side of Fredric Jameson’s claim that postmodernism—characterized by its inability to find forms adequate to the present, still less to anticipate wholly new futures—was the “cultural logic of late capitalism.”

The future is always experienced as a haunting: as a virtuality that already impinges on the present, conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production. What hauntological music mourns is less the failure of a future to transpire—the future as actuality—than the disappearance of this effective virtuality. Leyland James Kirby, the man behind the Caretaker project, released an album whose title captured perfectly the sense of yearning for a future that we feel cheated out of: *Sadly, The Future Is No Longer What It Was*. Faced with the collapse into a time

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**Whistle and I'll Come to You** © BBC. Courtesy of BFI.

dominated by pastiche and reiteration, hauntological music found itself at the heart of a paradox. Could the only opposition to a culture dominated by what Jameson calls the “nostalgia mode” be a kind of nostalgia for modernism?

It is worth returning to some of Jameson’s argument about postmodernism here, especially because film plays such a crucial role in his theorization of this “nostalgia mode.” Jameson argues that postmodernism is characterized by a particular kind of anachronism. His analysis is nowhere more vivid than in his discussion of Lawrence Kasdan’s *Body Heat* (1981). “[F]rom the outset,” Jameson writes in *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991): “a whole battery of aesthetic signs begins to distance the officially contemporary image from us in time: the art deco scripting of the credits, for example, serves at once to program the spectator to the appropriate ‘nostalgia’ mode of reception . . . [T]he setting has been strategically framed, with great ingenuity, to eschew most of the signals that normal convey the contemporaneity of the United States in its multinational era: the small-town setting allows the camera to elude the high-rise landscape of the 1970s and 1980s . . . ,

while the object world of the present day—artifacts and appliances, whose styling would at once serve to date the image—is elaborately edited out. Everything in the film, therefore, conspires to blur its official contemporaneity and make it possible for the viewer to receive the narrative as though it were set in some eternal thirties, beyond real historical time” (20–21).

What blocks *Body Heat* from being a period piece or a nostalgia picture in any straightforward way is its disavowal of any explicit reference to the past. Jameson concludes that *Body Heat*’s anachronism constitutes a “waning of historicity,” and that this brings home “the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience.” By the twenty-first century, the kind of pastiche which Jameson discusses was now no longer exceptional; in fact it had become so taken for granted that it was not liable to be noticed any more. But while *Body Heat* edits out “artifacts and appliances” in order to project us into a time “beyond history,” what is perhaps more typical of early twenty-first-century Hollywood is the converse case: an obsessive foregrounding of the technological artifacts of



**The Stone Tape** © 1972 BBC. DVD: BFI Video (U.K.).

the consumer present, together with a conspicuous use of digitally enabled technologies such as CGI. Yet this anxious insistence on the paraphernalia of the contemporary obfuscates the fact that the formal features of what we are seeing and hearing are familiar to the point of being exhausted. Relentless technological upgrades—the same thing, seen and/or heard on a new platform—disguise the disappearance of formal innovation and new kind of sensory experience.

How well does this take on hauntology translate into a discussion of cinema and television? As a first approach to this question, we should note that much hauntological music is as much about film and TV as it is about music. The *Caretaker* borrowed his name from the role that Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) takes on at the Overlook Hotel in Kubrick's 1980 film *The Shining* (about which more shortly). In fact, the whole *Caretaker* project was originally motivated by a simple conceit, the idea of making a whole album's worth of material that could have been heard in the Overlook. The *Caretaker* subjects 1930s tea-room pop to degradation (delay, distortion), rendering it as a series of sweet traces that are veiled by one of sonic hauntology's signature traits, the conspicuous use of crackle, which renders time as an audible materiality. Part of the excitement provoked by the Ghost Box label, meanwhile, was the canon of an audiovisual culture from the near past—alluded to stylistically and in sleeve notes—it both revived and made a bid to continue. This mixture of genre film and public service broadcasting included the work of BBC Radiophonic Workshop, whose experimentation with electronics translated *musique concrète* into incidental music in radio and television drama; Nigel

Kneale's extraordinary BBC TV play *The Stone Tape* (1972), which drew upon T. C. Lethbridge's idea that haunting may be actual recordings of traumatic events; and Anthony Shaffer's *The Wicker Man* (1973), with its sui generis condensation of paganism, folk music, and horror. The Britishness of this lineage is no accident—neither is the fact that most, but by no means all, of the artists that have been described as hauntological are British. The yearnings detectible in much hauntological music were no doubt stirred up by the expectations raised by a public service broadcasting system and a popular culture that could be challenging and experimental.

If the conditions for this “popular modernism” were provided to a large extent by social democracy, its aspirations were not confined to a hope that social democracy would simply continue. The radical dimension of social democratic culture, in fact, consisted in the way it produced a longing for its (self-)overcoming, that it was premised on the movement toward a scarcely imaginable future. As Owen Hatherley has argued, bulldozed brutalist buildings are one sign that this future did not arrive. The actual future would not be popular modernism, but populist conservatism: the creative destruction unleashed by the forces of business on the one hand, the return to familiar aesthetic and cultural forms on the other. It would not be British, but American; or at least it would a certain version of “the American” exemplified in consumer culture. This resurgence of conservatism was interrupted by a new normativity—the demands of the “new social movements” resulting in an intolerance of sexism, racism, and homophobia. But it now seems that the price of this new normativity was the disintegration of social democracy and of the workers' movement that forced social democracy into existence in the first place. One of the futures that haunts those who count themselves as progressive, then, is the possibility of a culture that could continue what had begun in postwar social democracy, but that could leave behind the sexism, racism, and homophobia which were so much a feature of the actual postwar period.

“To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept,” Jacques Derrida wrote in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Routledge, 1994, 161). Hauntology was this concept. One of the repeated phrases in *Specters of Marx* is from *Hamlet*, “the time is out of joint,” and in his recent *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, Martin Hagglund argues that this broken sense of time is crucial, not only to hauntology but to Derrida's whole deconstructive

project. “Derrida’s aim,” Hagglund argues, “is to formulate a general ‘hauntology’ (*hantologie*), in contrast to the traditional ‘ontology’ that thinks being in terms of self-identical presence. What is important about the figure of the specter, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*” (Stanford University Press, 2008, 82). Provisionally, then, we can distinguish two directions in hauntology. The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which is still effective as a virtuality (the traumatic “compulsion to repeat,” a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern). The second refers to that which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behavior).

In addition to being another moment in Derrida’s deconstruction—where “hauntology” would resume the work formerly done by concepts such as the trace or *différance*—*Specters of Marx* was also a specific engagement with the immediate historical context provided by the disintegration of the Soviet empire. Or rather, it was an engagement with the alleged disappearance of history trumpeted by Fukuyama. What would happen now that actually existing socialism had collapsed, and capitalism could assume full spectrum dominance, its claims to global dominion thwarted not any longer by the existence of a whole other bloc, but by small islands of resistance such as Cuba and North Korea? *Specters of Marx* was also a series of speculations about the media (or post-media) technologies that capital had installed on its now global territory—hauntology was by no means something rarefied; it was proper to the time of “techno-tele-discursivity, techno-tele-iconicity,” “simulacra,” and “synthetic images.”

But this discussion of the “tele-” shows that hauntology concerns a crisis of space as well as time. As theorists such as Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard had long acknowledged—and *Specters of Marx* can also be read as Derrida settling his account with these thinkers—“tele-technologies” collapse both space and time. Events that are spatially distant become available to audience instantaneously. Neither Baudrillard nor Derrida would live to see the full effects—no doubt I should say the full effects so far—of the “tele-technology” that has most radically contracted space and time, the Internet, and it is significant that the discourse of hauntology should have been attached to popular culture at the moment when cyberspace enjoyed dominion over the reception, distribution, and consumption of culture—especially music culture. The erosion of spatiality has been amplified by the rise



**The Shining: Overlook Hotel** © 1980 Warner Bros. Inc. DVD: Warner Home Video.

of what Marc Augé calls the “non-place”: airports, retail parks, and chain stores which resemble one another more than they resemble the particular spaces in which they are located, and whose ominous proliferation is the most visible sign of the implacable spread of capitalist globalization. The disappearance of space goes alongside the disappearance of time: there are non-times as well as non-places.

Haunting can be seen as intrinsically resistant to the contraction and homogenization of time and space. It happens when a place is stained by time, or when a particular place becomes the site for an encounter with broken time. “What is anachronistic about the ghost story,” Jameson wrote it in his essay on Kubrick’s *The Shining*, “is its peculiarly contingent and constitutive dependence of physical place and, in particular, on the material house as such” (“Historicism in *The Shining*,” [www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/0098.html](http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/0098.html)). *The Shining* in fact anticipates many of the preoccupations that have reemerged in the twenty-first-century take on hauntology. The film refers to hauntology in the most general sense—the quality of (dis)possession that is proper to human existence as such, the way in which the past has a way of using us to repeat itself. But it also engages with a specific historical crisis—a crisis of historicism itself—that would only intensify in the years since it was released. It is also worth remembering that Kubrick’s own work, along with contemporaries such as Coppola and Scorsese, was part of a popular modernism in American cinema that peaked in the 1970s and which has haunted Hollywood ever since: both as something that it seeks to simulate (a simulation that Coppola and Scorsese themselves increasingly found it impossible to





**The Shining: Torrance and Grady** © 1980 Warner Bros. Inc.  
DVD: Warner Home Video.

perform convincingly) or exorcise (all the better to replace it with mediocre blockbuster spectacle).

*The Shining* was released at a threshold moment in U.S. and U.K. history, when neoliberalism and neoconservatism had just taken over, and the Fordist organization of industrial production was ebbing away in favor of more precarious—and some have said “immaterial”—forms of labor. The architecture of the Overlook Hotel reflects this threshold—the bland office in which Jack meets the manager (“as multinational and standardized as a bedroom community or a motel chain,” according to Jameson), looks forward to the non-places of coming corporate hyperdomination, while the rest of the hotel looks back to the repressed specters of American history: organized crime, atrocity, and the extermination of native Americans. Where anachronism is “blurred” in something like *Body Heat*, it is staged in *The Shining*. This anachronism, this experience of a time that is out of joint, is in fact the very subject of the film. Many of the film’s most unnerving moments—Jack confronting his ostensible predecessor, Delbert Grady (Philip Stone), in the bathroom and reminding him of actions that he has “no recollection” of performing (namely killing his own family); Jack himself smiling from the center of a photograph taken in the 1920s—derive from the foregrounding of anachronism. And what is the Overlook Hotel itself, where one door can lead into a ballroom endlessly playing dreamy delirious 1920s pop, and another can reveal a moldering corpse, whose corridors extend in time as well as space, if not a kind of architecture of anachronism? This can be heard in its soundtrack, which conflates the prewar crooning of Al Bowlly with the electronica of Wendy Carlos, as much



**A Warning to the Curious** © BBC. Courtesy of BFI.

as it can be seen in all the revenants from earlier moments in the hotel’s history that menace and seduce Jack.

Given Derrida’s emphasis on the various teletechnologies, it is significant that *The Shining* is about telepathy as well as haunting—the telepathic sensitivities of Jack and his son Danny (Danny Lloyd), it is suggested, are what the malevolent forces in the hotel use to manifest themselves, a concept which perhaps reflects anxieties about the “action at a distance” which is the form contemporary power increasingly assumes. (*The Shining* was part of a rash of films about telepathy in this period: in addition to *Carrie* in 1976—also based on a Stephen King novel—there was De Palma’s *The Fury* in 1978 and Cronenberg’s *Scanners* in 1981.) Hauntology itself can be thought of as fundamentally about forces which act at a distance—that which, to use Slavoj Žižek’s distinction, insists (has causal effects) without (physically) existing. One of the novelties of *The Shining* is the way it connects an older concept of the ghost story with the psychoanalytic emphasis on the agency of the past. All of the ambivalences of Jack’s role as the Overlook’s “caretaker” are relevant here: Jack is one who takes care, but also one who lacks any agency of his own. Insofar as he belongs to the hotel, he exists only in a caretaker capacity, as one who merely insures that the past (the obscene, homicidal underside of patriarchy) will keep repeating.

The Overlook itself can be seen as an example of what Reza Negarestani, in his book *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Autonomous Materials*, calls: “Inorganic Demons or xenolithic artifacts. These relics or artifacts are generally depicted in the shape of objects made of inorganic materials (stone, metal, bones, souls, ashes, etc.). Autonomous, sentient



**Quatermass and the Pit** © 1967 Hammer Film Productions Ltd. DVD: Optimum Classics (U.K.).

and independent of human will, their existence is characterized by their forsaken status, their immemorial slumber and their provocatively exquisite forms ... Inorganic demons are parasitic by nature, they ... generate their effects out of the human host, whether as an individual, an ethnicity, a society or an entire civilization" (re.press, 2008, 223). Negarestani could also be describing here a cluster of British films and television programs made between the 1950s and the 70s. The fiction of M. R. James, Kneale, and Alan Garner is fixated on the encounter with such "inorganic demons" in specific (hauntological) landscapes—landscapes stained by time, where time can only be experienced as broken, as a fatal repetition. To consider the films and television programs based on these writers' work now is to be caught up in a hauntology that is (at least) double. For these works were hauntological in the sense that, like *The Shining*, they were about the virtual agency of the *no longer*. In this, they constitute a kind of "pulp modernist" answer to Freud's psychoanalysis and to the attempt to recover lost time in the literary experiments of Proust and Joyce. Yet this kind of public service broadcasting, and the broader popular modernist culture of which it was a part, itself now belongs to the *no longer*. There is a special charge to be had from disinterring these

works in which "time is out of joint" in our current dehistoricized, end-of-history moment.

It was James who established the template that the other writers—consciously or not—would follow. James's "Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad" (originally published in 1904) was adapted—as *Whistle and I'll Come to You*—for the BBC by Jonathan Miller in 1968; and "A Warning To The Curious" (1922) was adapted by Lawrence Gordon Clark in 1972. (Both have just been reissued on DVD by BFI Video.) In both stories, an urban interloper into the East Anglian countryside disinters a "xenolithic artifact" (an old whistle, a crown) that calls up ancient, vengeful forces. The BBC adaptations are remarkable for their attention to place. The camera lingers on the eerily empty Norfolk and Suffolk landscapes, which become in many ways the most significant agency in the television films. Nigel Kneale's masterpiece, *Quatermass and the Pit* (originally a BBC serial in 1958; remade as a superior film version by Hammer studios in 1967), in effect blew this narrative structure up to cosmic proportions. Here, it is London—and more specifically the fictional London Underground station, Hobbs End—which is the site for the encounter with a xenolithic artifact, a Martian spacecraft. The spacecraft exerts influence



**The Red Riding Trilogy: 1974** © 2009 Red Riding 1974 Limited. DVD: Optimum Home Entertainment (U.K.).

telepathically, and *Quatermass and the Pit* amounts to nothing less than a retelling of human history. Phenomena that seemed to be supernatural through the ages are explained as encounters with the Martian travellers who—in a twist that anticipates the recent *Prometheus*—interbred with apes in order to produce the human species as we now know it. The xenolithic artifact triggers a traumatic, deeply suppressed race memory of these alien origins.

Garner is the third figure in this triumvirate. His two novels, *The Owl Service* (1967) and *Red Shift* (1973), are about (mythical) structures that repeat by parasiting the energy of adolescents. Both novels center on relics—in *The Owl Service*, a dinner service decorated with an owl pattern; in *Red Shift*, a spearhead. Both are also new versions of myths: *The Owl Service* is an updating of the story of Blodeuwedd from the collection of Ancient Welsh folk tales, the Mabinogion; *Red Shift* is a take on the Tam Lin legend, about a boy abducted by fairies who is ultimately saved by his true love. Both are also about particular landscapes—Wales and Cheshire—and the suggestion is that it is the combination of artifact, landscape, adolescence, and mythic structure that potentiates the fatal repetitions which the novels track. Both were also adapted for television: *The Owl Service* by Granada in 1969, and *Red Shift* (by Garner himself) for BBC's *Play For Today* in 1978. *Red Shift* was supposedly inspired by some cryptic graffiti that

Garner saw: “Not really now not any more.” This immensely suggestive phrase, Garner’s version of “the time is out of joint,” captures what is at stake in so much of the present discussion of hauntology. “Not really now not any more” points to the postmodern impasse, the disappearance of the present and the possibility of representing the present. But it also points to an alternative temporality, another way in which time can be out of joint, a mode of causality that is about influence and virtuality rather than gross material force.

What of hauntology now? Channel 4’s remarkable 2009 adaptations of David Peace’s *Red Riding* novels (1999–2002) constituted a kind of hauntological return to a model of public broadcasting supposedly made obsolete by neoliberalism. Peace’s novels were a disinterring of the 1970s—the fascination with this period over the last few years, as it has transformed from an object of memory into historical narrative (via kitschy retro), is no doubt due in part to the fact that it was the decade when, in the U.K., social democracy fell into terminal decline, and neoliberalism’s shock doctrine prepared the way for the total reconstruction of social life. We see the shadow of this near future in the first of the televised trilogy, *1974*, when Sean Bean’s architect unveils the plans for a shopping mall which will mean that there is no need to “fuck off home,” a perfect summary of the way in which the non-places of





**Robinson in Ruins** © 2010 Patrick Keiller and the Royal College of Art. DVD: BFI Video (U.K.).



**Content** Courtesy of Illuminations Films.



consumerism will also eliminate time. The surface subject of Peace's novels—police corruption and incompetence, the crimes of the Yorkshire Ripper—rests upon his deeper fascination with the intersection of place and period. By contrast with the soft-focus kitsch of something like the BBC's *Life on Mars* series, in which police violence becomes one more wistfully evoked signifier of a longingly remembered past, the 1970s appears here as a cursed period, just as Yorkshire becomes a cursed territory. (One of the main failings of Tom Hooper's disastrous 2009 adaptation of Peace's *The Damned United* is its refusal to engage with this question of territoriality.) And what is a curse if not a form of hauntology?

The work of John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective touch on similar (haunted) territory. When the BAFC's 1986 film *Handsworth Songs* was shown at Tate Modern in the wake of the English riots in the summer of 2011, Akomfrah posed a question about hauntological causality—what is it about certain places, such as Tottenham, which means that riots keep happening? How, when the whole population of an area has changed, do such repetitions occur? *Handsworth Songs* can be read as a study of hauntology, of the specter of race itself (an effective virtuality if ever there was one), an account of how the traumas of migration (forced and otherwise) play themselves out over generations, but also about the possibilities of rebellion and escape. Its experimental essayistic form, driven as much by Trevor Mathison's anempathic sound design as by the images, meant that it could in some respects be considered the culmination of popular modernism in British public broadcasting. *Handsworth Songs* was made for Channel 4, but it is impossible to imagine it or anything like it being commissioned by any U.K. public broadcaster now. With its sampling of archive sources such as BBC radio's production of *Under Milk Wood* and documentary images of Caribbean immigrants arriving in Britain, Akomfrah's recent *The Nine Muses* (2010) was in part a requiem for this lost era of popular modernism.

Patrick Keiller's *Robinson* trilogy offers a different take on hauntology and landscape. In one respect, the *Robinson* films can be seen as a study of the rise of post-Fordist

England. The England Keiller sees rising from the wreckage of industrialism is a deterritorialized zone, a non-place that is sinister in its very anonymity. Yet, in their return to sites of martyrdom and antagonism—*Robinson in Ruins* (2010), for instance, touches upon Greenham Common and the woodland where scientist David Kelly was found dead—the films attempt to counter the neoliberal erasure of history, prompting us to speculate on what might have been, or to contemplate how the struggles whose sites the camera captures could be revived. Chris Petit's *Content* (2010) is, like Keiller's films, an anatomy of the non-places of post-Fordist Britain—his camera capturing “the prosaic sheds” that are “the first buildings of a new age”—and a study of the disappearance of time and space themselves in the ether of cyberspatial communication. But it is also a stirring up of some of the potentials that late capitalism has closed off. Like Petit's first film, *Radio On*—released in that threshold year, 1979—*Content* dreams of a different kind of British film, one that has more in common with European art cinema than with the dreary heritage-industry kitsch that came to dominate cinema in the U.K. Like the *Red Riding* trilogy, *Content*, which was first broadcast on Channel 4's spinoff channel More4, seemed incongruous when it was aired, as if it did not to belong in contemporary broadcasting at all. In one sense a throwback to older public service broadcasting and experimental cinema, the film was in fact more like a flare from a future that did not arrive in a country that, after 1979, as Petit puts it in *Content*, was “reversing into a tomorrow based on a nonexistent past.”

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ABSTRACT Consideration of the idea of hauntology encompassing Jacques Derrida's introduction of the term in *Specters of Marx*; Fredric Jameson's analyses of postmodernism and *The Shining*; and a British tradition of literature, film, and television by such authors as John Akomfrah, Alan Garner, M. R. James, Patrick Keiller, Nigel Kneale, David Peace, and Chris Petit.

KEYWORDS Hauntology, *The Shining*, John Akomfrah, Patrick Keiller, Chris Petit