So It Goes: Hauntology, Lost Futures, and Mac Miller

Ryan Hiemenz

Dr. Lisa Holderman
CM460 - Senior Seminar I
8 December 2022

"It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism." British philosopher and critic Mark Fisher opens his 2009 book titled *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* with that quite jarring statement. However, jarring as it may be, there's an unsettling truth to it. In this book, Fisher examines the state of our neoliberal capitalist society and critiques how the ideologies behind it are and will continue to bleed into our popular culture, work based learning and education, and mental health. His fundamental understanding of capitalist realism is that, "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2). He goes on to explain that capitalist realism is not something that is only ingrained in art, advertising, or other sites of potential propaganda. Instead, it's a "pervasive atmosphere" that invades the production of our culture and impedes upon our thoughts and actions.

Due to this, our understanding of capitalism masks the reality of the control and exploitation ingrained in capital, forcing us to live in an ironic contradiction. Fisher quotes the French philosopher Alain Badiou who states, "a brutal state of affairs, profoundly inegalitarian - where all existence is evaluated in terms of money alone - is presented to us as ideal. To justify their conservatism, the partisans of the established order cannot really call it ideal or wonderful. So instead, they have decided to say that all the rest is horrible. Sure, they say, we may not live in a condition of perfect Goodness. But we're lucky that we don't live in a condition of Evil. Our democracy is not perfect. But it's better than the bloody dictatorships. Capitalism is unjust. But it's not criminal like Stalinism." (Fisher 5). Essentially, according to Badiou, we must turn our gaze away from the contradictions and lower our expectations in order to be free and safe from totalitarian control. However, Fisher argues that it's all a guise. The brutality seen in these various forms of control and totalitarianism do not cease to exist in a capitalist society, instead

they are masked in a much more systemic approach to the very same thing. He says that "capitalism brings with it a massive desacralization of culture," meaning that all of the culture and history in a given place is stolen and then made into a commodity, further perpetuating this cycle (Fisher 6). There is nothing new anymore, nothing that makes each and every one of us special, nothing that makes us human. Just capitalism.

He explains, "Capitalist realism no longer stages this kind of confrontation with modernism. On the contrary, it takes the vanquishing of modernism for granted: modernism is now something that can periodically return, but only as a frozen aesthetic style, never as an ideal for living" (Fisher 8). He argues that capitalist realism is a type of rejection. A rejection of everything we know (or don't), space, time, history, culture, art, everything. Everything *except* for the control of capital. The frozen aesthetic style he mentions is nothing more than a commodification of the desire to return to modernism. However, it's impossible to truly return, so it is merely a superficial "trick" played on consumers in order to sell more of a good. This in turn has led to a society that seems to be mourning, one that yearns for the "good old days" of modernity and the experiences, attitudes, and cultural norms that went along with that period.

It's here that the concepts Fisher discusses diverge in two paths, both of which discuss the same longing for a time before neoliberal capitalism, but in two different ways. One follows the economic and political side of this dynamic, and the other the more emotional and cultural side. For the purposes of this essay, I will be focusing on the latter. Fisher's second book, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* is a collection of essays and writings from Fisher's blogger alias, "k-punk," that brings the fairly bleak concepts brought forth by many postmodernist thinkers to various forms of media and his interactions with them.

Though Fisher tended to think of the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, as "a frustrating thinker," his invention of the term "hauntology" in *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning, and The New International* paved the way for this line of thought (Fisher 16). Written in 1993, the book was originally published in response to the questions of what was to become of Marxism following the collapse of many Communist governments across Eastern Europe, and the neoliberal and capitalist celebration that ensued after.

However, in order to understand the foundations of Derrida's hauntology, we must first remember the opening lines of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto* that say, "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre" (Marx and Engels). And to an extent, capitalist ideologies have gotten rid of something since communism is not as prevalent as it was in the past. However, it is not gone. Just the body of communism is dead, and as Derrida writes, "Capitalist societies can always heave a sigh of relief and say to themselves: communism is finished since the collapse of the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century and not only is it finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost. They do no more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back" (Derrida 123). In effect, the very powers that sought to "kill" communism are the ones that have made it a specter, and a specter, like a ghost, cannot die. Derrida expands upon Marx and Engels' infamous idea of a specter, both defining it and using it as the framework for his subsequent arguments within *Specters of Marx.*

In the first chapter, *Injunctions of Marx*, he defines a specter as follows, "As soon as one no longer distinguishes spirit from specter, the former assumes a body, it incarnates itself, as spirit, in the specter. Or rather, as Marx himself spells out, and we will get to this, the specter is a

paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other" (Derrida 5). In other words, a specter is a paradox created by those who seek to destroy it. That paradox being the creation of something without a body that does not actually exist, however it's trying to exist in the form of whatever it was trying to exist as. This is Derrida's understanding of a specter, and though it is incredibly abstract in its definition, his application of the concept helps the argument take shape.

But what exactly does a specter do? In the final chapter, *Apparition of the Inapparent*, Derrida explains, "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. Ontology is a conjuration" (Derrida 202). We know that Derrida's use of the term "haunt" comes from the themes of specters throughout his writings. So, he argues here that specters are in some way contained within every concept, including our very existence and the temporality that seems to govern us. Derrida names hauntology as a play on the word ontology, and since ontology is understood as the study of being, hauntology can be defined in the same way, but for specters. Hauntology then, is the study of how a specter is born, how it continues to exist, and the power it has to continue existing *especially* when it is being "destroyed". If a conjuration, as Derrida describes, is a futile attempt to get rid of a specter wherein the attempt only gives the specter more strength, then his claims about ontology argue that what keeps hauntology alive is the very existence of ontology.

This understanding of hauntology was left untouched for nearly a decade, and it wasn't until the 2000's that the term came back, but this time it was inspired by musical artists whose

work sounded “ghostly” in nature. In his 2012 article from *Film Quarterly*, *What is Hauntology?*, Fisher describes this merge of media and hauntology as a “confrontation with a cultural impasse: the failure of the future” (Fisher 1). The idea that the future has failed is a fundamental piece of Fisher’s hauntology. He believes that in our culture we have failed to progress to a point beyond any leading cultural innovation. He quotes the Italian philosopher Franco Berardi in saying that we are living in a time, “after the future” (Fisher 1). This distressing loss of the future forces our entire model of social imagination to decay, leaving us with an inability to think beyond the world or time in which we currently live.

What becomes increasingly important in Fisher’s hauntology is the emphasis on the specter. One phrase that comes up many times in Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* is, “The time is out of joint” (Derrida 98). This line from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* informs hauntology’s influence over temporality. In a sense, hauntology creates an anachronism which just comes in the form of a specter. A specter cannot be fully present, it is there, but not really. In a sense it has no being in itself but it marks two temporal directions in its existence, the no longer and the not yet. Fisher explains, “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)” (Fisher 4). In essence, a specter can be a being of the past, one that nags in the brain and though it is from a time before, it encourages the repetition of its time. On the other hand, a specter can also be a longing for the future, an excitement and expectation that dictates current behaviors and feelings.

In *Ghosts of My Life*, Fisher begins with a synthesis of both hauntology and his own theory of lost futures. He calls this "the slow cancellation of the future," which he goes on to explain as the phenomenon in which the way artistic time periods are experienced is fading away. Fisher uses the example of the British sci-fi series *Sapphire & Steel* as a means to define an anachronism as "the slippage of discrete time periods into one another," before adding that he believes this anachronism is present in our current 21st century culture. He then continues, "The 'jumbling up of time', the montaging of earlier eras, has ceased to be worthy of comment; it is now so prevalent that it is no longer even noticed" (Fisher 6). To explain this dynamic, Fisher describes how there are large differences between music from the 70s, music from the 80s, and music from the 90s, and that it was from those changes that people who grew up during that time could measure the passage of cultural time. The experimental music that was present through those decades gave a sense of infinite possibilities. Now however, according to Fisher, "the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion. It doesn't feel like the future. Or, alternatively, it doesn't feel as if the 21st century has started yet. We remain trapped in the 20th century, just as Sapphire and Steel were incarcerated in their roadside café" (Fisher 8). In other words, the current state of culture is not at all experimental as it once was, it's just a mess of reusing things from the past without truly creating anything new. Because of this, Fisher thinks that we're stuck in a type of limbo between the 20th and 21st centuries. Our culture struggles to conceptualize anything that's truly original, therefore the future is stuck; it's canceled.

There's a reason for this though, which is where the understanding of *Capitalist Realism* comes into play. The neoliberal, capitalist society that Fisher describes in his first book is again what dictates our interactions with art and culture. He writes, "neoliberal capitalism has

gradually but systematically deprived artists of the resources necessary to produce the new" (Fisher 15). When art and media is commodified, the primary goal becomes making a profit rather than pushing the boundaries of a given art form. The reason for this being the understanding that visible sales numbers are imperative to the ability to be an artist. For example, Fisher discusses how in the UK, some postwar and higher education funding provided artists with the space and money to experiment with pop culture from the 60s to the 80s. However, the increasing pressures of producing something immediately successful restricted those artists immensely until they inevitably stopped trying. This marketization of a public service is what Fisher argues caused "an increased tendency to turn out cultural productions that resembled what was already successful" (Fisher 15). He believes that creating truly original works of art has become nearly impossible because it takes too long to create and to make a notable profit from, therefore in order for artists to survive they must recycle. He says in a lecture, "Our expectations have declined, and this flattening out of time has become more naturalized. I don't think we, anymore, expect music to sound like a radical break from the past" (Fisher). This fading of an expectation to push beyond what has already been done is what Fisher calls "The Death of the Future," which Fisher then ties into his understanding of hauntology.

What spawns from this "Death of the Future," is a specter. A specter that, in Fisher's application of hauntology, haunts the present state of art, media, and culture. However, it's a bit different from Derrida's hauntology. For Derrida, we are haunted by something of the past. On the contrary though, Fisher argues that in his hauntology we are haunted by the lost futures that were promised to us, but never arrived. The "good" world where people worked together and built upon the media, cultures, and technologies of the 20th century. Instead though, we got a world that is suffocating within the tight grip of neoliberal capitalism. Haunting then, as Fisher

describes, is a “failed mourning,” of the futures we never got to experience. He writes, “The specter will not allow us to settle into/ for the mediocre satisfactions one can glean in a world governed by capitalist realism” (Fisher 22). This nagging feeling of something more, begging us to not be complacent is the very core of Fisher’s hauntology. For him, the specter that is necessary in a hauntological equation, is not something of the past, nor is it the disappearance of something, like Derrida describes. Instead it is the vanishing of what Fisher calls a “virtual trajectory” (Fisher 22). In other words, we’re haunted by what could’ve been.

It’s here that Fisher goes on to question whether hauntology is just another name for nostalgia. He examines the ubiquity of nostalgia and flips the question back on itself by asking “nostalgia compared to what?” He then explains, “It seems strange to have to argue that comparing the present unfavourably with the past is not automatically nostalgic in any culpable way, but such is the power of the dehistoricising pressures of populism and PR that the claim has to be explicitly made” (Fisher 25). To simplify, Fisher does not believe that just because hauntology looks at the present as worse than the past it must be nostalgic, but since there is such a strong following to the concepts of nostalgia that remove pieces of history from their original contexts this claim has become increasingly important. To Fisher, hauntology and nostalgia are separate concepts that include many of the same elements. He argues that nostalgia tends to falsely overestimate the past, leaving out key components of the time period in a “rose colored” look at history. For example, while the 70s may have been a time of immense cultural growth, it was also a time of casual racism, sexism, and homophobia. Nostalgia tends to negate those additional details and focus purely on a longing for the former. In hauntology, Fisher explains, there is not a longing for a particular time period, but instead a longing for a resumption of the processes present in democratization and pluralism. To further illustrate the difference between

the terms he writes, “What should haunt us is not the *no longer* of actually existing social democracy, but the *not yet* of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised. These spectres - the spectres of lost futures - reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world” (Fisher 27). Where nostalgia concerns itself with the past, hauntology haunts us from the future (or lack thereof), and because of this, these specters of our failed futures disapprove of the nostalgia that we commonly understand. After establishing this groundwork in the first few essays of *Ghosts of My Life*, Fisher then uses the rest of the book to provide various art and media examples of the concepts he brought forth.

The examples he uses stretch from seldom known (at least in the U.S.) British TV shows to massive international bands like Joy Division, all of which are inherently hauntological in some way or another. To Mark Fisher, Joy Division’s music marked a new tonality in the 70s, one that is depressed and bleak. According to him, their emergence coincided with the time in which our futures were officially canceled, the same time where the end of joint public development was in sight and the solidarity of labor was gaining momentum. Fisher notes that, “From the start their work was overshadowed by a deep foreboding, a sense of a future foreclosed, all certainties dissolved, only growing gloom ahead” (Fisher 50). He feels that they capture the depressed nature of our present, even though it would be their future. Joy Division’s music, according to him, represents that depressing state of nothingness, the materialistic incoming future, and the hopelessness within the lost futures he theorizes. The fundamental pieces of hauntology, the loss, dread, and vanishing, are inherent in Joy Division’s music both in Ian Curtis’ monotonous vocals and the hopeless tone of each song. To be more specific, Fisher writes, “Joy Division is organized around a vivid sense of loss. It is self consciously a study of a time and a place, both of which are now gone. Joy Division is a roll call of disappeared places

and people - so many dead, already: not only Curtis, but also the group's manager Rob Gretton, their producer Martin Hannett and of course Tony Wilson" (Fisher 51). Joy Division had embodied these hauntological themes of loss, even before all of the tragic deaths in the band's history, most notably Curtis' suicide at age 23. Fisher believes that the loss of so many involved in the projects adds to the haunting feeling while listening to them, and points to the truly dangerous effects of a neoliberal capitalist state on mental health, and especially that of artists.

However, musical hauntology is not limited to the past predicting a bleak future, there are present examples of hauntology in music as well. Fisher compares some of the early works of Kanye West and Drake to the themes present in hauntological projects by British New Wave artists Joy Division and New Order. In terms of style, Fisher believes that Kanye West's *808s and Heartbreak* captures the essence of early 80s synth pop and the melancholia ingrained in Joy Division and New Order's music. He writes, "The opening track 'Say You Will' sounds like it has been worked up out of the crisp synthetic chill of Joy Division's 'Atmosphere' and the funereal drum tattoo of New Order's 'In A Lonely Place'" (Fisher 174). Kanye West brings the hauntological themes of these British bands from the past into a massively popular album for a new generation and a new audience. Once pieces of hopelessness for the future, now these themes note the impossibility of the present and the longing for the future that never came. This goes further with West's use of auto tune throughout the album. According to Fisher, a major signature of consumer culture in the 21st century is the idea of digitally upgraded normality, something that allows us to digitally erase our flaws to be more marketable. When discussing the final track on *808s and Heartbreak*, "Pinocchio Story," Fisher considers Kanye West's auto tuned lamentation saying, "you can either hear this as the moment when a commodity achieves self-consciousness, or when a human realizes he or she has become a commodity" (Fisher 175).

This inescapable commodification is a product of the neoliberal capitalist world in which we live, and in various forms of hauntological music we can see artists realizing this troubling fact, but not being able to do anything about it.

Fisher's examination of hip-hop goes further when discussing the hedonism that's historically ingrained within the genre. According to him, there is a deep sadness behind the forced smile of the 21st century, especially in hip-hop. The genre has more recently aligned itself with themes of consumerist pleasures, however it is in this hyper affluent consumerism we find the most melancholia. Since Drake and Kanye West have long since acquired any and everything they could have wanted, they are now fixated on exploring the depressed, hollow state of affluent hedonism. Fisher writes, "Drake and West instead dissolutely cycle through easily available pleasures, feeling a combination of frustration, anger, and self-disgust, aware that something is missing, but unsure exactly what it is. This hedonist's sadness - a sadness as widespread as it is disavowed - was nowhere better captured than in the doleful way that Drake sings, 'we threw a party/ yeah, we threw a party.' on *Take Care*'s 'Marvin's Room'" (Fisher 175). In the broader scheme of both artist's discographies, what makes their music hauntological is that desire to find what is missing. They are both haunted by what isn't there, leading to artistic lamentations both in sadness of their current position and in a desire to go back to a pre-commodified time.

Though at times it seems too abstract to be real, Hauntology is ingrained all throughout our current society. Even without knowing it, artists are producing music in an attempt to scratch the itch in the back of their mind. The itch that whispers in their ears telling them the life they're living should have been so much more, yet here we are. The neoliberal capitalist reality that Fisher explains is not sustainable, but that fact is repressed leaving an inescapable societal sadness. And as Fisher writes, "The sadness ceases to be something we feel, and instead consists

in our temporal predicament itself, and we are like Jack in the Gold Room of the Overlook Hotel, dancing to ghost songs, convincing ourselves that the music of yesteryear is really the music of today" (Fisher 181).

In *Ghosts of My Life*, Fisher exemplifies the concepts of his theories through popular artists that are particularly important to his own life. I seek to do the same, and I truly cannot think of another artist that better illustrates these concepts than the late Pittsburgh rapper, Mac Miller. On July 10th, 2012, Mac Miller tweeted, "I am not even a real person to most of you. I am nothing but a name attached to something you love. Most of you will never meet me" (Miller). This tweet comes towards the beginning of his rise to fame, after the releases of his three hit mixtapes *K.I.D.S.* (2010), *Blue Slide Park* (2011), and *Macadelic* (2012). Here we can begin to see some of the mental turmoil that Drake and Kanye West also felt while navigating being an artist in a capitalist realist world. He is struggling with the fact that a capitalist society does little to separate the person from the product, and he wishes for more out of the creation of his music. Following this tweet, Mac's discography begins to shift to a more existential, questioning tone that only evolves as he grows both in popularity and as an artist. Themes of dissonance, depression, loneliness, and the lies of fame became more common in both Mac's lyrics and the mechanical aspects of his music. This trend reaches its climax with the 2018 release of *Swimming*, an album that was met with immensely positive critical reception. It debuted as number three on the U.S. Billboard 200, and was nominated for Best Rap Album at the Grammys in 2019. However, though there was so much commercial success, the album was overshadowed by Mac's passing just months after its release. Due to this context and more, *Swimming* by Mac Miller is an inherently hauntological project, one that exemplifies the

cancellation of the future and a hedonist's sadness both thematically through lyrics and motifs, and also musically through stylistic and technical choices.

To understand Mac Miller, it's important to look at his discography as a whole. He exploded onto the music scene in 2010 with his first mixtape *K.I.D.S.* when he was just 18 years old. At the time, his music revolved around having a good time, partying, and making the most of your life. The next few mixtapes followed suit, but began to explore more questioning themes as Mac grew up in the commodified world of a modern artist. There was a certain hopeful optimism inherent in Mac's early mixtapes, one that conveyed his enjoyment of fulfilling his material desires with his newfound wealth. He was on top of the world and could do anything he wanted. However, similar to Fisher's discussion of Drake and Kanye West, the limitless feelings fade leaving a void that's haunted the work of the two artists. With this in mind, Mac's fall into drug addiction at a young age and the continuous battle that followed could have been his attempt to fill this void. As his condition worsened, his music became darker and that hopeful joy present in his early days faded away. Like the failure of the future that haunts the present in Fisher's writings, Mac's individual future failed. The lavish life he was promised that should have come as a product of his fame was not what it appeared to be, leaving him to struggle with adjusting to his commodified life alone.

This becomes more apparent in his first studio album, *Watching Movies with the Sound Off,* released in 2013 when Mac was 21. The album dives head first into existence, the human condition, addiction, and loneliness, themes that continued to be included in the studio albums that followed. In an interview with Soulection Radio, Mac notes, "I'm a human being, so I go through all of those emotions and my least favorite thing that anyone does is when they're going through something personally, but making music that doesn't match that… Like if you're sad,

bro, be sad, it's cool. If you're not sad, don't be sad" (Miller). As Mac aged and worked on his craft, the intentionality of symbols in his music improved, with each album creating "eras" of the rapper wherein he takes listeners on a journey through his mindset at the time. This, compounded with his expressions of a desire to be transparent in his music, very clearly exemplifies Mac's psyche through his time in the spotlight.

Mac's discography comes to its peak with *Swimming*, which was released on August 3rd, 2018, while Mac was at his highest point of exposure under the public eye. The album was released after his breakup with Ariana Grande, and following his car crash which, though he was safe, resulted in a DUI arrest. The core metaphor of *Swimming* then, is Mac expressing his desire to learn to swim through his hardships, pain, and addictions rather than drowning in them. This concept is reflected in every track, but each one can also be interpreted through the lens of hauntology which provides a new understanding of Mac Miller's sound and lyrics.

Swimming is a complex introspective journey that Mac takes, bringing listeners along for the ride as he attempts to find peace, acceptance, and self-love. He writes about his rise to fame, the side-effects of that, what it took to get there, and the complications that follow. All of these themes are present through various symbols, motifs, and questions that are present throughout the album's duration. For example, established in the opening lines of the first track, "Come Back to Earth," the motif of water and swimming are present as a symbol of growth. Mac sings, "In my own way, this feels like living / Some alternate reality / And I was drowning, but now I'm swimming / Through stressful waters to relief" (Miller 0:27). This constant battle between the internal struggles weighing him down and the realization that he has to swim through them to shore to find relief rather than away from them sets the tone for the entire album. Each track is a thoughtful debate between ideas, which is compounded by the consonance and dissonance of the

music itself. They all include the complex simultaneity of emotion that impacts all of the human experience, and can be considered hauntological in the battle of one emotion being haunted by the other side of itself. One of the most clear examples of this dynamic comes in the fourth track, “Perfecto.” This song deals with the simultaneous themes of perfection and the idea that not being perfect *is* perfect. He says, “Well, it ain't perfect but I don't mind / Because it's worth it,” as a means to explain that he understands the imperfections in his life, but the struggles with them or the lessons learned from them have made him who he is and that’s worth it to Mac (Miller 0:12).

With that in mind, there are particular points within this album that we can see threads of the ingrained hauntological concepts Fisher discusses. The first of which is exemplified in the album's third track, “What’s the Use?”. From the second it starts, listeners are met with a soulful throwback of a production, complete with a prominent baseline and synths. Mac enlists the help of Dâm-Funk, Thundercat, Syd, and Snoop Dogg in very specific ways in order to fully encapsulate the groovy feeling he’s trying to convey.

“What’s the Use?” is co-produced by Dâm-Funk, a funk artist and producer who is well known for his work within the subgenre of hip-hop known as G-funk. Drawing from the psychedelic funk artists of the 1970s, G-funk (or gangsta funk) originated from West Coast hip-hop in the late 1980s. Dr. Dre is commonly credited with popularizing this subgenre with his first solo album, *The Chronic*. According to *Discogs*, common G-funk characteristics include “multi-layered and melodic synthesizers, slow hypnotic grooves, a deep bass, female background vocals, the extensive sampling of P-Funk tunes, and a high-pitched portamento saw wave synthesizer lead” (Discogs). Dâm-Funk and Mac work together to include pieces of G-funk to make “What’s the Use?” feel like a throwback. There is a deep, groovy bassline performed by

Thundercat that pushes the rest of the track forward. On top of that baseline are the drums and synthesizers from Dâm-Funk, layered in a way to complement the fluctuations of the bassline. Then come the vocals from Mac, and the background vocals from Syd. However, the track goes further in pointing to G-funk. In the second chorus, Snoop Dogg, a legend in West Coast hip hop and G-funk, comes in to assist with vocals throughout the rest of the track. This track has one of the most thorough productions on the album, and with some thought the intent to make "What's the Use?" a G-funk song becomes clear.

With that now in mind though, we can see the beginnings of what Mark Fisher might look on as Hauntological in this track. Fisher uses the example of Kanye West's *808s and Heartbreak* pulling from 80s synthpop. Similarly, on *Swimming* (and on this track in particular) we see Mac anchors the music in the hip-hop scene of the 90s, a time of innovation and an explosion of popularity within the genre. However, the difference lies in the types of prior music that both artists are likening their sound to. For West, as Fisher notes, it comes from bands that are already known for their melancholia like Joy Division or New Order. For Mac though, the applied sound comes from an era of hip-hop that was more optimistic and hopeful for the growth of music. The difference here is striking because both artists are effectively achieving the same goal, but in different ways. Mac provides this G-funk sound in "What's the Use?" as a juxtaposition of the more recent music scene, one that sucks the life from artists leaving them feeling hollow and defeated for following their dreams. He employs the sound of a hopeful past to show what should have been built upon to bring in a hip-hop era of the future, or even the present, but instead what we have is a lost future. The dreams of the past hip-hop haunt present artists, as those dreams remind them of something that they can no longer achieve.

This idea is then compounded by the overall theme of the track. “What’s the Use?” begs the age old question of what’s really the point? Why does anything matter? Mac doesn’t present us with an answer, but through his verses we’re able to see the internal conflict of trying to understand the existential “why” that cannot be answered. By the end of the track, Mac realizes there’s not even a point to asking the existential questions he’s asked because there are no answers. He leaves us with, “It is what it is ‘til it ain’t,” essentially giving up on the “why” and just going with the flow of his life (Miller 3:18). Connecting this theme to the sonic choices then reveals a bleak, hollow feeling of inevitability. Mac is haunted by what was promised to him when he started making music, but he also realizes that there’s nothing he can do to go back to the 90s or to change the present enough for it to capture that same hopefulness. So instead, he says, “What’s the Use?” and continues along with his homage to the past even if it is just a temporary joy.

The album’s penultimate track, “2009” is known for being one of Mac’s most introspective and meaningful songs. He pours his soul out across its 5:47 runtime, both lyrically and instrumentally. With that thoughtful reflection comes a different, more personalized hauntology. One that is lumped in with a hedonistic sadness that accompanied Mac’s rise to fame. The song opens with a minute of an elegant string composition that is joined by a piano about halfway through. The beauty of this introduction is unlike anything else on the album or anything in his entire discography. The instruments come together to lift the listener from the ground and rise into the clouds where Mac shows his vulnerability and speaks directly to the audience. At the end of this intro, a sample of Chanté Moore’s “Chanté’s Got a Man” comes in and acts as the skeleton for the beat of the track. Shortly after the beat is established, Mac begins with the song’s chorus which includes the lines, “I ain't asking "Why?" no more / Oh, no, I take it

if it's mine / I don't stay inside the lines / It ain't 2009 no more / Yeah, I know what's behind that door" (Miller 1:24). This takes us in two different directions, both reaching for Fisher's ideas regarding lost futures and hauntology without knowing it.

The first half of the lines relate directly to "What's the Use?" and we're able to see that Mac has continued on the path that was revealed in the second half of that track. He's not asking "why?" like he was in the third track of the album, instead he's taken the previous eight tracks before "2009" forcing himself to understand that there is no answer. When discussing Drake and Kanye West, Fisher notes that they both "dissolutely cycle through easily available pleasures, feeling a combination of frustration, anger, and self-disgust, aware that something is missing, but unsure exactly what it is" (Fisher 175). Mac, too, is aware that something is missing but what's missing is the answer to the existential "why," which cannot be answered. The chorus of "2009" reveals to listeners that he has given up trying to answer the question, and therefore given up on the nagging feeling that something is missing in his life. This response is a recognition of the impossibility of the present and directly relates to a form of a lost future in Mac's life. He thought that as his life went on he would be able to understand the meaning of life, but he failed at the impossible task, leaving him to settle for what he has.

The second half of the excerpt of the chorus laments, "It ain't 2009 no more / Yeah, I know what's behind that door" (Miller 1:30). Following this direction, the lines send us back to the roots of Mac's career while he wonders if it was all worth it. 2009 was a big year for him, he was a senior in high school, he was set to release a mixtape titled *The High Life*, and he was pondering the big question of "what's next?" that we all face at the end of high school. He was running a blog to interact with his fans, along with promoting his upcoming mixtape, and on October 17th, 2009 he wrote, "I'm at a point in my career where I often question the topic of

college. Will I apply and try to get in right out of high school? Will I take a year to grind super hard? Will I keep my life on the "safe route?" I really don't know. But, for now, I'm just doin what makes me happy, and that is making music right from my soul. I feel that as long as I continue to satisfy myself the rest will fall into place" (Miller). Looking at this retrospectively is eerie, since we know what decisions he made based on these questions and where he landed because of them. In 2010, Mac released K.I.D.S. and the rest is history.

On "2009" he looks back on the years since his rise to popularity, the addiction, the depression, the failed futures, and he wonders if he made the right choice. He knows what's behind the door he chose, but not what's behind the one he didn't. Due to the vulnerability of this track, it's likely the strongest example of hauntological themes. Similar to "Pinocchio Story" in Fisher's example, this is the point in which Mac Miller achieves his self-consciousness. He knows that he and his music are commodities and that the artistic, hopeful journey he set out on in 2010 has failed. However, like Fisher notes, hauntology is not a longing for the past like nostalgia might be defined as, and neither is "2009". Instead, they are both expressions of a desire to regain the *feelings* of optimism and innovation felt in the past, and a mourning of the loss of that in the present.

Each verse of the track continues to build on this mournful questioning, even leading to Mac's confession that, "Sometimes, sometimes / I wish I took a simpler route / Instead of having demons that's as big as my house" (Miller 2:01). At this point in his career, he had been living and making art within the capitalist realist world described by Fisher for 8 years. Every record made in that time reveals a correlation between an increase in popularity and a steady decline in Mac's mental state. As his fame grew, the pressures of a neoliberal capitalist society weighed on his mind and craft, forcing him to be contained within a genre or style of music regardless of his

efforts to shed them. With the weight of the world on his shoulders, he found no relief in creating the art he once loved due to surrounding influences, resulting in him admitting to occasionally wishing he did not follow his musical dreams back in 2009. Furthermore, he also sings, “Isn't it funny? We can make a lot of money / Buy a lot of things just to feel a lot of ugly,” later in the verse which we can easily apply Fisher’s idea of a hedonist’s sadness. Mac was wealthy, and could afford all of his material desires, yet as his wealth grew so did his hollowness. The lifestyle he worked to achieve was not what it should have been, and the failed future of what was expected unfortunately haunted him to his grave.

“2009” is followed up by “So it Goes,” the final track of *Swimming*. The song acts as the perfect conclusion to the melancholic themes carried throughout the album, leaving a haunting “oh well” at the end of it all. The title refers to the phrase repeated throughout Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, published in 1969. The phrase is used any time there is a death described by a character and it serves as a haunting dismissal of death as a means to cope with the inevitability of death during war. Mac uses this phrase with the same resignation of the characters in Vonnegut’s novel, except his use is targeted at the accumulation of wealth and fame and the inevitability of his fall because of it. He expresses his struggles throughout the album, only to understand that because of the ingrained power of capitalism over life, there is no escape. And to that, there is but one thing to say: “So it goes.”

Meaning does not exist solely within economics, business, and exchange, yet we find ourselves forced to pursue only that. Mark Fisher’s teachings help us to understand the partly subconscious longing for a world in which we can interact with artistic ways of creation, imagination, and innovation. However, he also explains that due to the neoliberal capitalist realism that governs our society, there is very little hope for this artistic future. Even the

successful pieces of art today, often pay some homage to the more hopeful and artistic days of the past. For many, art is the very thing that makes life worth living and in an age of suppressing that very art with a strict market austerity, life loses its meaning. Furthermore, as artists continue to push forward into a market that values speed over growth, the art they create can be indicative of their personal turmoil while creating it. This then further pollutes the remnants of an artistic world that once gave meaning to creators and those who interacted with their creations. Unfortunately for both Fisher and Mac Miller, their untimely deaths serve as chilling proof of the very real societal and cultural conditions contained within Fisher's writing. Music, art, and all other forms of media have the power to impact our individual psyche and furthermore our greater sociological context. These things cannot be taken for granted, and especially not ignored or sacrificed for the impulses of capitalism.

References

Derrida, Jacques, et al. *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, The Work of Mourning, and The New International*. Repr, Routledge, 2011.

Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books, 2009.

---. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures*. Zero books, 2013.

---. "What Is Hauntology?" *Film Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2012, pp. 16–24, https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16. JSTOR.

Mac Miller Speaks on Creativity, Self-Belief, and Musicianship on Soulection Radio. Directed by Soulection, 2016. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OqKzWLLQdM.

Mark Fisher : The Slow Cancellation Of The Future. Directed by pmilat, 2014. *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCgkLICTskQ.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Penguin Books, 2011.

Miller, Mac. *2009*. Warner Records.

---. *Come Back to Earth*. Warner Records.

---. "Listen To Mac: I Love College?" *Listen To Mac*, 17 Oct. 2009, http://listentomac.blogspot.com/2009/10/i-love-college.html.

---. *Perfecto*. Warner Records.

---. *So It Goes*. Warner Records.

---. *What's the Use?* Warner Records.

n0din. “How Many of You Guys Got Too Meet Mac?” *R/MacMiller*, 23 Feb. 2021, www.reddit.com/r/MacMiller/comments/lqiypa/how_many_of_you_guys_got_too_meet_mac/.