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# “THIS IS A HAPPY HOUSE”

## The Weeknd, the Eerie and the Death Drive

### ABSTRACT

In his book *Ghosts of My Life*, Mark Fisher borrows Jacques Derrida's term hauntology and repurposes it to describe a sense of a lost futurity haunting contemporary music. He singles out party hauntology as a specific subset of hauntology in pop music in which uneasiness looms behind a facade of excess and pleasure. This paper revamps Fisher's term by focusing on the music of the Canadian artist The Weeknd. Exhibiting what Fisher terms depressive hedonia and interpassivity, The Weeknd is an example of the retreat into privatized suffering which cannot recognize its social character. However, the paper goes further by arguing that The Weeknd's music possesses an eerie quality due to a clash between upbeat, dance rhythms and dark lyrics which depict The Weeknd's constant

plunging into recreational sex and drugs although they do not satisfy him. As Fisher explains, the eerie is necessarily bound up with issues of agency and the paper will argue that the invisible agent behind The Weeknd's compulsive repetition is the death drive understood as Žižekian undead wandering around in guilt. Ultimately, as the mechanisms of capitalism in itself operate by the rules of the death drive, it will be shown that, due to his inability to understand his place in the system and submission to the necrocratic symbolic order, The Weeknd's music is the perfect soundtrack to the capitalist realist regime.

**KEY WORDS:** hauntology, the eerie, death drive, capitalist realism, The Weeknd

## INTRODUCTION

As Frederic Jameson astutely argued as early as 1991, the-then-nascent neo-liberal ideology brought about a cultural tendency towards formal nostalgia and ahistoricity, which brought many progressive artistic strands to a creative halt. For example, the vibrant 1990s electronic music genres were replaced by the benign repetitions of electronic dance music (EDM), while the subversiveness of political rap was replaced by its capitalist realist iterations that postulated being rich as life’s purpose. Yet, the feeling remains that the ghost of the bygone eras in which sociocultural conditions were different still lurks and reaps uneasiness behind the facade of joyful boasts. The uneasiness is best explained using Mark Fisher’s interpretation of the term ‘hauntology’.

The term ‘hauntology’ derives from Jacques Derrida’s work *Specters of Marx* (1993). It is a blend of the words ‘haunt’ and ‘ontology,’ and much like Derrida’s earlier concepts such as *différance* and *trace*, focuses on absence. In other words, hauntology is Derrida’s new ontology which is no longer about that which is present, but absent, relying on the idea that “everything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it, allowing it to possess such consistency and intelligibility that it does.”<sup>2</sup> Especially significant about hauntology is the question of time—the spectre which haunts the present is never fully present as it has no being in itself, but always represents a no longer or not yet, a past event that continues to be effective or an event which has not yet happened, but is already effective in the virtual.<sup>3</sup> Since the spectre is nothing supernatural, it is an agency of the virtual, which means that it acts without physically existing.

Linked to hauntology is the concept of mourning, as “the slow, painful withdrawal of libido from the lost object.”<sup>4</sup> Fisher suggests that hauntology is a failed mourning, one in which we either refuse to let go of the ghost, or the ghost refuses to let go of us. He further suggests that the object we mourn for is actually a general tendency—what he calls popular modernism—a cultural condition in which culture retains the innovative, futuristic impulse of modernism without being elitist.<sup>5</sup> Such condition favoured collectivism and innovation, yet declined with the rise of neoliberalism and, according to

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2        Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester, UK; Washington, US: Zero Books, 2014), 17–18.

3        Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 18.

4        Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 22.

5        Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 22.

Jameson, its cultural counterpart postmodernism,<sup>6</sup> which established pastiche as its cultural form. The ahistoricity of the pastiche, as a play of empty surfaces devoid of any content and connection with the historical conditions in which they arose, goes hand in hand with the neoliberal tendency to naturalize capitalism as the best and only form of governance. In a similar fashion, Wendy Brown defines neoliberalism as an “order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life,”<sup>7</sup> locating the specificity of the contemporary form of capitalism in the transformation of every aspect of human life into the marketplace. Given that competition, self-investment and productivity are the all-pervasive standard, it has become impossible to imagine any alternative to the present state. As Fisher claims, “the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion,”<sup>8</sup> in which the future and ideas about it have been slowly cancelled, to paraphrase Franco Berardi.

Hauntology, then, is the spectre of precisely this lost futurity, a haunting sense that once innovation and futures were possible, but have never come to fruition. Fisher, however, warns that we should not be haunted by the no longer so much as by the not yet, implying that simply revisiting the past is not an effective way out of the current capitalist realism, “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.”<sup>9</sup> Instead, we should be haunted by the not yet, by the glimpses of the future that popular modernism had promised but which never came into being, by the projections of the continuation of popular modernist projects of democratization and pluralism.

Even more importantly for this paper, Fisher identifies a specific strand of hauntology he dubs ‘party hauntology,’ which describes a feeling of unidentifiable uneasiness in the midst of material abundance, a sense of entrapment which is only emerging within a commodified consciousness. Whilst Fisher notices this phenomenon in the music of Kanye West and Drake, this paper will attempt to revamp the concept by applying it to a more contemporary example, that of the Canadian musician The Weeknd. The paper will argue that in The Weeknd’s music this uneasiness stems from an eerie sense of control by a foreign agent, which will be identified as the death drive. Ultimately, it will be shown that the workings of the death drive are in

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6 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 17.

7 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos. Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 30.

8 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 8.

9 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hants, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 2.

harmony with the workings of capitalism, thus blocking viable alternatives to the capitalist regime.

## PARTY HAUNTOLOGY AND HIP HOP

Fisher originally used the concept of hauntology to describe the works of artists such as Burial or Caretaker. British producer Burial has self-consciously mourned for a certain lost horizon, the collectivist Rave culture of the 1990s, which he never belonged to but still felt a part of, attempting in his music to replicate the analogue sounds of crackle, reminiscent of the happier days of music characterized by intense innovation, when future seemed more than possible. Unlike Burial’s gloomy, skeletal constructions, party hauntology refers more to the forced exaltation of the 21st century pop culture behind which there is a sense of stupor and an arrested imagination. As Fisher puts it, party hauntology can be described as “a secret sadness” lurking behind the lush pop songs, “the miserable hollowness at the core of super-affluent hedonism.”<sup>10</sup> Fisher finds examples of party hauntology even in pumped-up dance songs such as David Guetta’s “Play Hard,” which, he argues, reflects the contemporary erosion of boundaries between work and non-work. The chorus “Keep partyin’ like it’s your job”<sup>11</sup> implicitly takes away the enjoyment from this partying, as it does nothing more than to signal our inability to get away from work and the complete invasion of neoliberalism into the tissue of everyday life. As Fisher explains: “In a (not at all trivial) sense, partying is now a job. Images of hedonistic excess provide much of the content on Facebook, uploaded by users who are effectively unpaid workers, creating value for the site without being remunerated for it. Partying is a job in another sense—in conditions of objective immiseration and economic downturn, making up the affective deficit is outsourced to us.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Fisher suggests that the party anthem “I Gotta Feeling” by the Black Eyed Peas “comes off more as a memory of a past pleasure than an anticipation of a pleasure that is yet to be felt,<sup>13</sup> that is, by revoking the 1990s Rave as if it had never happened, it refuses to face the past and admit that the futures which the original Ravers promised have not been fulfilled.”<sup>14</sup>

10 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 175.

11 David Guetta, lyrics to “Play Hard,” *Genius* (2013), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/David-guetta-play-hard-lyrics>.

12 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 180.

13 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 181.

14 The application of hauntology to the music of Burial differs from party hauntology. Burial and the like explore their relationship to the lost futures and the workings of memory, whilst party hauntology is much more about attempting to grapple with an unidentifiable discomfort within hedonism and a realization of one’s own entanglement in capitalism. However, what both of these hauntologies share is a focus on the no longer aspect, the first one coming very close to nostalgia, the other to capitalist realism.

Fisher states, however, that the genre most haunted by lost hope is hip hop, which has “become increasingly aligned with consumerist pleasure over the past 20-odd years.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, although the artists have acquired personal wealth, there is no actual sense of fulfilment, but just an aimless circling through pleasures. Fisher suggests this is best exemplified by Drake’s melancholic album *Take Care* and the autotuned stupor of *808s & Heartbreak* by Kanye West. The lyrics of the final track on *808s and Heartbreak*, “Pinocchio Story,” reveal a gaping void behind all the glitz and glamor:

Do you think I’d sacrifice, a real life  
For all the fame, and flashing lights?  
There is no Gucci I can buy  
There is no Louis Vuitton to put on  
There is no YSL that they could sell  
To get my heart out of this hell, and my mind out of this jail.<sup>16</sup>

Fisher describes this as the “moment when a commodity achieves self-consciousness, or when a human realizes he or she has become a commodity,”<sup>17</sup> implying that West finally addresses the flipside of wealth.

A similar phenomenon can be traced in a genre directly inspired by the lazy autotuned vocals and 808 synths—trap. ‘Trap’ is a slang term for a place where drugs are sold illegally, and the origins of the genre are quite similar to gangsta rap, with topics such as dealing and street life. Yet, its 21st century iteration exhibits much less “street cred” and, rather, indulges in gloating about wealth, cars, guns, women and drugs. However, far from being simply a boastful genre blissfully praising wealth, trap is characterized by heavy, slow beats, hazy synthesizers and lazy mumbles, reminiscent of a drug-induced torpor. The emotion invoked is nothing like the gleeful hippie fantasies of hookah-smoking caterpillars or magic dragons, but is much more akin to lethargy, an inability to cope with the present and a subsequent retreat into the private world of misty Percocet syrups and marijuana. The tracks perfectly embody what Fisher, following Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek, terms ‘interpassivity’.

Žižek explains the notion of interpassivity using the example of canned laughter—the spectator is relieved of his duty to laugh, or enjoy, and relegates this responsibility to the Other.<sup>18</sup> Fisher uses the example of going to the cinema to see a film which questions capitalism—by doing so, we are relieved of our responsibility to contemplate the regime and may “continue

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15 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 175.

16 Kanye West, lyrics to “Pinocchio Story,” *Genius* (2008), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/Kanye-west-pinocchio-story-lyrics>.

17 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 175.

18 Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, New York: Verso, 1997), 115.

to consume with impunity.”<sup>19</sup> As Fisher explains: “The introspective turn in 21st century (post)dance music was therefore not a turn towards emotion, it was a shift from collectively experienced affect to privatized emotions.”<sup>20</sup> Trap music is interpassive in that it touches upon the feelings of hopelessness and loss, of a world without any meaning in which one cannot assume their place, yet fails to interpret this anxiety as markedly social, choosing to repress it through sensual gratification. Take “Codeine Crazy,” a song by one of the most popular trap artists Future, in which signs of this underlying anxiety burst out through the haze of drugs and recreational sex: “Take all my problems and drink out the bottle and fuck on a model, yeah.”<sup>21</sup> Future even flirts with suicidal thoughts, but never tries to interpret the origins of his uneasiness: “Fuck the fame, I’m sipping lean when I’m driving/All this cash and it ain’t nowhere to hide it/I’m an addict and I can’t even hide it/Don’t you panic, panoramic companion.”<sup>22</sup>

The underbelly of wealth and consumer culture is especially emphasized in the genre of emo trap, which blends the emo rock tradition with trap beats. XXXTENTACION’s lyrics of “Jocelyn Flores” deal very straightforwardly with depression:

I’m in pain, wanna put ten shots in my brain  
I’ve been trippin’ ’bout some things, can’t change  
Suicidal, same time I’m tame . . .  
And ever since then, man, I hate myself  
Wanna fuckin’ end it, pessimistic.<sup>23</sup>

The music of Lil Peep is even more connected to the emo rock tradition with abrasive guitar riffs over heavy trap beats. “Cry Alone” is a raw song about sadness with drugs no longer helping him numb the anxiety: “I don’t wanna cry alone right now/Kissing on styrofoam right now/I don’t wanna die alone right now/I just did a line of blow right now.”<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, Lil Peep would go on to accidentally overdose on Xanax, casting another ominous shadow on trap’s fixation on drugs. Yet, in none of the songs is depression linked to the capitalist regime producing it through precarity, endless repetition and sensory overload. As Fisher claims: “Instead of treating it as incumbent on

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19 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 12.

20 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 173.

21 Future, lyrics to “Codeine Crazy,” *Genius* (2014), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/Future-codeine-crazy-lyrics>.

22 Future, lyrics to “Codeine Crazy.”

23 XXXTENTACION, lyrics to “Jocelyn Flores,” *Genius* (2017), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/Xxxtentacion-jocelyn-flores-lyrics>.

24 Lil Peep, lyrics to “Cry Alone,” *Genius* (2018), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/Lil-peep-cry-alone-lyrics>.

individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast *privatization of stress* that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill?”<sup>25</sup> Intriguingly, the rawness of emo trap and coded anxiety of mainstream trap songs find perfect expression in the music of one contemporary artist.

### THE WEEKND AND THE EERIE

The Weeknd, or Abel Tesfaye, is a young Canadian hip hop/R&B musician, who rose to fame in 2015 with his second album *Beauty Behind the Madness*. The Weeknd first drew attention to himself with a trilogy of dark mixtapes full of self-deprecation and misery. Much akin to the emo trap sensibility, The Weeknd’s earlier works present a directionless, listless existence, overstimulated by digital culture and unable, as Fisher would put it, to make his life into a coherent whole.<sup>26</sup> In the eerie “House of Balloons/Glass Table Girls,” Tesfaye and a female are intoxicated, and the underlying anxiety compels them to assert they are having so much fun:

If it hurts to breathe, open a window (Woo-oooh)  
Oh, your mind wants to leave (Leave), but you can’t go  
Oh, this is a happy house (A happy house)  
We’re happy here (We’re happy here)  
In a happy house  
Oh this is fun, fun, fun, fun  
Fun, fun, fun, fun  
Fun, fun, fun, fun.<sup>27</sup>

A number of his other songs mix depression and drugs, for example “Wicked Games,” with lyrics such as: “Bring your love, baby, I could bring my shame/Bring the drugs, baby, I could bring my pain.”<sup>28</sup> In “Coming Down” The Weeknd records the feelings of loneliness and fright when the drugs start subsiding: “Pick up your phone/The party’s finished and I want you to know/I’m all alone/I’m feelin’ everything before I got up/I always want you when I’m

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25 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 19.

26 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 24.

27 The Weeknd, lyrics to “House of Balloons/Glass Table Girls,” Genius (2011), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/The-weeknd-house-of-balloons-glass-table-girls-lyrics>.

28 The Weeknd, lyrics to “Wicked Games,” Genius (2011), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/The-weeknd-wicked-games-lyrics>.

coming down.”<sup>29</sup> As with Fisher’s example of his student who could not do without having their earphones in or at least playing inaudible music while they were at their desk, so The Weeknd’s music interpassively recedes from the outside world, finding the drug-induced stupor as the only response to the challenges of contemporary world: “The use of headphones is significant here—pop is experienced not as something which could have impacts upon public space, but as a retreat into private ‘OedIpod’ consumer bliss, a walling up against the social.”<sup>30</sup>

Many critics<sup>31</sup> have never found such strength in Tesfaye’s later works which exhibit less musical boldness and lyrical depth. With growing popularity, Tesfaye’s music took on the order-of-the-day formal nostalgia, heavily relying on the 1980s sounds by laying the retro R&B soul synth sounds on top of a contemporary heavy bass. This is especially true of The Weeknd’s *After Hours* (2020), which displays, in Baudrillardian terms, a mummification of the 1980s sound and its ahistorical reuse. However, his music nevertheless continues to infallibly display what Nick Murray of *Village Voice* recognizes to be “depressive hedonia,<sup>32</sup> an inability to do anything other than pursue pleasure<sup>33</sup>—but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed beyond the pleasure principle.

Thus, his music presents an ambivalent tug-of-war between the underlying anxiety and a glossy, sedated sound. Unlike trap’s heavy beats and hazy synthesizers, The Weeknd’s music possesses a lot of upbeat and danceable elements which render its hedonically depressed content all the eerier, to draw on a concept which will prove crucial for the understanding of The Weeknd’s relationship with the world and his place in it. Take, for example, “Starboy,” a groovy bass-driven song often perceived as a feel-good dance hit. In the song we will find exactly this pursuit of pleasure in consumerism and recreational sex, which is inevitably entangled with the utter objectification of women:

I’m tryna put you in the worst mood, ah  
Pi cleaner than your church shoes, ah  
Milli point two just to hurt you, ah  
All red Lamb’ just to tease you, ah  
None of these toys on lease too, ah

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29 TheWeeknd, lyrics to “Coming Down,” Genius (2011), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/The-weeknd-coming-down-lyrics>.

30 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 24.

31 See Murray of *Village Voice*, 2020; Palo of *Vulture*, 2020.

32 Nick Murray, “Drake and The Weeknd Wallow in their Misery,” *Village Voice* (2012), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2012/01/18/drake-and-the-weeknd-wallow-in-their-misery/>.

33 Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 175.

Made your whole year in a week too, yah  
Main bitch out your league too, ah  
Side bitch out of your league too, ah.<sup>34</sup>

Although one may think that with such self-contented brags about sexual prowess and purchase power the song will be upbeat, its very texture summons a certain ambivalence. The heavy beat and distant, melancholic piano chords foretell that there is something darker lurking behind the bliss. This is witnessed in the lyrics “Switch up my cup, I kill any pain,”<sup>35</sup> showing The Weeknd still resorts to drinks and drugs to avoid reality. However, despite the awareness that women, drugs and money cannot be soothing, we witness an inability to get out of the pattern and a joyous plunging into dissolution. The Weeknd’s music clearly presents an encounter with an outside that controls The Weeknd’s life, but cannot be perceived. The feeling of an unfathomable outside is best captured in Mark Fisher’s term ‘eerie,’ as an inhuman entity exerting influence on humans.<sup>36</sup> As Fisher explains: “The eerie, by contrast,<sup>37</sup> is constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or (sic!) there is nothing when there should be something.”<sup>38</sup> An example of the first mode of the eerie, the failure of absence, is best exemplified in an eerie bird cry—we are unsettled by the ominousness of the bird’s cry, trying to find some intent in it that is usually not ascribed to animals. What is essential to this mode of the eerie and what distinguishes it from the mysterious is the sense of alterity, “a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that lie beyond common experience.”<sup>39</sup> An example of the second mode of the eerie would be ruins and abandoned structures like the Stonehenge. The eeriness these structures provoke relates to the radical unknowability of the symbolic order which created them: “For the symbolic structures which made sense of the monuments have rotted away, and in a sense what we witness here is the unintelligibility and the inscrutability of the Real itself.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, these remains reveal an eeriness behind the cultural practices. The key issue this realization raises is the issue of agency, of the existence or inexistence of an agent watching over us and of its character.

34 The Weeknd, lyrics to “Starboy,” Genius (2016), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/The-weeknd-starboy-lyrics>.

35 The Weeknd, lyrics to “Starboy.”

36 Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, Repeater Books, 2017.

37 By contrast to the weird, which denotes a presence which does not belong where it is found. Fisher argues that the popular Freudian term the Unheimlich conflates the weird and the eerie which should, however, be distinguished as one implies a strange presence, and the other an unsettling absence.

38 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 61.

39 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 62.

40 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 63.

The agent behind the eerie sense of The Weeknd’s music will be exposed in this paper as the familiar concept of “obscene immortality.”<sup>41</sup> In the following section it will be argued that The Weeknd’s music illustrates the workings of the death drive, understood not as a tendency towards one’s extinction, but as a repetition, an enjoyment in the failures of one’s own desire, which, as will be shown, is analogous to the eerie nature of capitalism and its inbuilt mechanisms of self-destruction.

## THE WEEKND AS THE EMBODIMENT OF THE DEATH DRIVE

The ambiguous death drive appears in the works of Freud as a desire of organic life to return to the inorganic.<sup>42</sup> However, as Žižek notices, Freud is frightened by the prospect that all life is governed by such a negative force so he drafts the binary opposition of Eros and Thanatos to neutralize it and harmonize the cosmos, which Žižek fully rejects as “pagan wisdom.”<sup>43</sup> Instead, following Lacan, Žižek insists that “Eros and Thanatos are not two opposite drives that compete and combine their forces (as in eroticized masochism); there is only one drive, libido, striving for enjoyment, and ‘death drive’ is the curved space of its formal structure.”<sup>44</sup> As Hook explains, for Žižek, the death drive is not a substantial entity, it is a form rather than a structure, a constitutive “gap”<sup>45</sup> in human psychology. Thus, for Lacan and his dogmatic reader Žižek, the death drive has nothing to do with biological death: “The Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension; it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying—a name for the ‘undead’ eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain.”<sup>46</sup>

As has been shown, The Weeknd’s music perfectly fits this description of a vampire-like tumbling from one drug to the other without a clear purpose. The song “The Hills” probably best captures the eeriness of The Weeknd’s music. As ever, The Weeknd cannot but brag about how “I just fucked two bitches ’fore I saw you/And you gon’ have to do it at my tempo.”<sup>47</sup>

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41 Slavoj Žižek, “The Obscene Immortality and its Discontents,” *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 11, no. 2 (2017): 1.

42 Derek William Hook, “Of symbolic mortification and ‘undead life’: Slavoj Žižek on the death drive,” *Psychoanalysis and History* 18, no. 2 (2016): 221–56.

43 Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Toward a New Foundation for Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), 123.

44 Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2014), 305.

45 Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, 305.

46 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 61.

47 The Weeknd, lyrics to “The Hills,” *Genius* (2015), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/The-weeknd-the-hills-lyrics>.

Yet, the eerie synth, stunted beat and mechanical bass drone pulsate with emptiness, as The Weeknd confesses his life is not fulfilling: “I only love it when you touch me, not feel me/When I’m fucked up, that’s the real me.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, he explicitly owns that drugs do not work any longer to numb him: “Always tryna send me off to rehab/Drugs started feelin’ like it’s decaf,”<sup>49</sup> yet he still fights to maintain this illusion of happiness rather than to face the emptiness: “I’m just tryna live life for the moment/And all these motherfuckers want a relapse.”<sup>50</sup>

However, one aspect of the death drive also explains the seemingly incongruous upbeat pulsations of the music. This is the assertion that death drive is always accompanied by *jouissance*, libidinal gratification, the fact that it derives satisfaction from its failures.<sup>51</sup> A fantastic example is Tesfaye’s other smashing hit “Can’t Feel My Face,” a song seemingly about love, as innumerable others in pop culture, but turning to be about The Weeknd’s favourite drug—cocaine. Misled by the song’s dance bass and upbeat tempo, it is easy to overlook expressions of an inability to extricate himself from the false safety of the matrix of stupor: “And I know she’ll be the death of me at least we’ll both be numb.”<sup>52</sup> The Weeknd appears to find *jouissance* in the repeated failures of gratification and his undead wanderings: “I can’t feel my face when I’m with you/But I love it.”<sup>53</sup> A similar feeling is evoked by “Reminder,” which shows that even acclaim is not strong enough to bring any satisfaction, as, ironically, the very system generating the acclaim is the one that strips it of any meaning, let alone longevity: “Platinum off a mixtape, sipping on that codeine/Pour it in my trophies, roll until my nose bleed/I’m a keep on singing while I’m burning up that OG.”<sup>54</sup>

What is essential is the fact that the death drive is a function of the symbolic order. By virtue of the fact that the symbolic cuts access to the materiality of objects, the signifier is always connected with death, as “the thing in its immediate, corporeal, reality is annihilated,” the thing “must ‘die’ in order for its reality to reach its conceptual unity through its symbol.”<sup>55</sup> This symbolic death is exemplified in the vampire-like aesthetics of The Weeknd’s latest album *After Hours*. The album cover and videos for “In Your Eyes” and “Blinding Lights” display Tesfaye as an undead vampire, blood dripping from his mouth,

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48 The Weeknd, lyrics to “The Hills.”

49 The Weeknd, lyrics to “The Hills.”

50 The Weeknd, lyrics to “The Hills.”

51 Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 182.

52 The Weeknd, lyrics to “Can’t Feel My Face,” Genius (2015), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/The-weeknd-cant-feel-my-face-lyrics>.

53 The Weeknd, lyrics to “Can’t Feel My Face.”

54 The Weeknd, lyrics to “Reminder,” Genius (2016), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/The-weeknd-reminder-lyrics>.

55 Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 74.

in a manner quite reminiscent of Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* aesthetics. The lyrics solidify this image of obscene immortality, dead inside, but unstoppable in its conquest of joy: “Cause I’m heartless/And I’m back to my ways ‘cause I’m heartless/All this money and this pain got me heartless/Low life for life cause I’m heartless.”<sup>56</sup> This is vividly rephrased by Johnston: “insofar as the denaturalization of nature brought about by the sociocultural overwriting of vital being involves the colonization of the living (i.e., the organic body) by the dead (i.e., the symbolic order), one could say... that human life is lived under the dominance of a lifeless set of cadaverizing signifiers.”<sup>57</sup> The idea that the symbolic order is the frame of the death drive resonates well with the ideas of Reza Negarestani,<sup>58</sup> who argues that capitalism is a regime which functions the same way as the death drive and needs to be combated by a new speculative thought.

### CAPITALISM’S DEATH DRIVE

Discussing the potential of speculative philosophy to combat capitalism, Reza Negarestani argues that contemporary speculative realist thought falls short of providing viable political alternatives, yet continues debating capitalism. Negarestani discusses Nick Land’s position in which capitalism is perceived as a “detoured and hence complex singularity toward the inorganic exteriority which ultimately enforces an all-inclusive liberation from the conservative nature of the organism and its confines for thought.”<sup>59</sup> Land argues that human faculties are overdetermined by anthropomorphic material experience which limits their speculative potential, so he greets capitalism’s inclination towards dissipation, its “partially repressed desire for meltdown,”<sup>60</sup> as a liberating move towards the inhuman. However, Negarestani argues that this stance incorrectly draws a line of correspondence between capitalism and the fact of dissipation, which in turn posits capitalism as the sole horizon of human life and claims it is an emancipative force as it frees us from the disenchantment with human cognitive faculties.<sup>61</sup> Negarestani argues that Ray Brassier tries to escape this epistemological trap by imposing the dissipative tendencies onto the whole cosmos. In other words, he attempts to circumvent

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56 The Weeknd, lyrics to “Heartless,” Genius (2019), accessed 20 March 2020, <https://genius.com/The-weeknd-heartless-lyrics>.

57 Adrian Johnston, *Žižek’s Ontology* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 188.

58 Reza Negarestani, “Drafting the Inhuman: Conjectures on Capitalism and Organic Necrocracy,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Melbourne: Re.press, 2011), 182–201.

59 Negarestani, 185.

60 Negarestani, 184.

61 Negarestani, 185.

the notion of inhumanist capitalism as emancipation by proposing a kind of cosmic eliminativism, in which all of cosmos, not just the human burdened by the shackles of anthropocentrism, dissolves.<sup>62</sup> While conceding that this idea does move us away from Land’s, Negarestani argues it nonetheless leaves capitalism and its modes of dissipation unquestioned. According to Negarestani, both of these thinkers’ theories neglect the fact that the dissipation they argue for remains in line with the conservative economic order of the organism. In other words, their speculative projections stop at the ways the organisms bind exteriority, never questioning the fact that capitalism conforms to the economy of dissipation in which organisms dissipate in the most affordable ways, die along a trajectory similar to the one carved by capitalism. Negarestani elucidates that the affordable way to die is, essentially, the conservative nature of the organism, its “ability to temporarily postpone death and convert the acquired time to capitalizable ‘interests,’”<sup>63</sup> in other words, that in its passage to death, the organism still needs to fulfil its capitalist duties. He, thus, exposes capitalism as a truly necrocratic regime in which the organism’s tendency towards dissipation must necessarily conform to the economic order, which is in line with the Lacanian perception of the symbolic as resembling death more than natural death alone.<sup>64</sup> Negarestani believes that a speculative turn would require “the possibility of alternative ways of binding exteriority qua concept-less negativity,”<sup>65</sup> a position which neither conforms to the economic order nor presents itself as its radical exteriority.

With its exuberance and drug-induced excess, The Weeknd’s music resembles the definition of life under the necrocratic regime challenged by Negarestani as “a slope-curve between the inevitability of death and conservative conditions of the organism.”<sup>66</sup> His music mirrors the capitalist “partially repressed desire for meltdown,”<sup>67</sup> the undead persistence built into capitalism. As Žižek explicates, the very existence of the symbolic implies its potential to disappear: “The very existence of the symbolic order implies a possibility of its radical effacement, of ‘symbolic death’—not the death of the . . . ‘real object’ in its symbol, but the obliteration of the signifying network itself.”<sup>68</sup>

This proposition brings us back to an important issue—that of agency. It is strange to attribute desires, tendencies or lust to such a decentred and inanimate object as capitalism. As Fisher describes it, “capital is . . . conjured out of nothing,” but “nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly

- 62 Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- 63 Negarestani, 193.
- 64 Hook, “Of symbolic mortification and ‘undead life.’”
- 65 Negarestani, 199.
- 66 Negarestani, 198.
- 67 Negarestani, 184.
- 68 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 147.

substantial entity.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Hook explains the ambiguous treatment of the death drive in Žižek, in whose work it is often referred to as both an agency and an absence. For Žižek the death drive is not a thing, but a gap opened up between life and death. As such it comes to resemble what Fisher describes as ‘the eerie,’ an inhuman force with its own agency. On the other hand, it perfectly fits the virtual agency of capital which “does not exist in any substantial sense, yet it is capable of producing practically any kind of effect.”<sup>70</sup> However, one should be careful with attributing agency to capitalism, as it indicates an acceptance of its mechanisms. As Fisher puts it: “What needs to be kept in mind is both that capitalism is a hyper-abstract impersonal structure and that it would be nothing without our co-operation.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, capitalism is not a real entity, but an impersonal structure parasitizing on what Peter Fleming calls “the commons”<sup>72</sup> to perpetuate its obscene immortality. By the commons, Fleming refers to the emotional and creative capabilities of citizens and workers which is outside neoliberal capitalism, but still necessary, as capitalism cannot reproduce on its own. However, according to Fleming, workers are starting to perceive the superfluousness of the capitalist regime and have replaced the old strategy of fighting against it for simply withdrawing their capacities from it, hoping this short-circuits its expansion.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, in line with Negarestani’s view, The Weeknd’s music proves to be a perfect soundtrack to the capitalist realist era rather than a questioning of it. It may be true that certain trap acts, and especially The Weeknd, have epistemologically surpassed a vast majority of pop artists still *optimistically* promoting the ability to purchase as a road to joy (which is especially problematic in terms of postfeminist commodification of feminism and the female body<sup>73</sup>). Indeed, The Weeknd has acquired a sort of consciousness beyond consumerism, yet this consciousness still has no way to understand itself, to excavate its causes and own up to them, as Fisher puts it, it “is aware that something is missing,

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69 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 11.

70 Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 64.

71 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 15.

72 Peter Fleming, *Resisting Work: The Corporatization of Life and Its Discontents* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 2.

73 Pop music is saturated with references to “retail therapy” (e.g., Ariana Grande’s “7 rings”) as a way of self-help and the instances of inscription of clear material value on the female body (e.g., “If you know your pussy worth a Benz truck” in Nicki Minaj’s “Rich Sex” or “Pussy ain’t free I might have to charge more/Check numbers gotta be looking like barcodes” in Cupcakke’s “Barcodes”). This postfeminist sentiment, which promotes the ability to purchase and commodifies the female body, whilst purporting to be liberating, is actually fully in line with the neoliberal order.

but unsure exactly what it is.”<sup>74</sup> The music displays a hedonistic inability to look for anything other than pleasure to annul the anxiety of life, which is perceived as something unchangeable, something to be avoided as these artists do not have the strength or the tools to overcome it. Rather than challenge the necrocratic regime which empties signifiers of meaning and promotes a pleasure in repeated failures to numb the senseless existence, The Weeknd is completely subject to the workings of the death drive and its necrocratic economy of pleasure. This Žižekian non-entity controlling his life produces eerie effects in The Weeknd’s music, the eeriness of not being able to break away from an inhuman force dictating one’s way towards dissolution. As such, The Weeknd is fully focussed on the no longer aspect of hauntology, as it is incapable of imagining any viable alternative to the *status quo*. Ultimately, The Weeknd’s songs display a millennial lethargy, a capitalist realist belief in the fixity of the present condition. Despite exposing cracks in capitalism, far from being subversive, this music induces interpassivity by painting any political thought, let alone action, as futile, always already destined to fail and too much work in any case. □

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74 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 175.

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