

Article

Cultivating Complexity in an Age of Digital Dominance and Binary Oppositional Thinking

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Abstract: The work represented in the following essay explores meaning-making in the context of creating in a digitally saturated culture. The digital imperative, with its binary oppositional structure (ones and zeroes), has increasingly asserted itself as the only option, from learning management systems (LMSs) to nearly all financial transactions, to the deepening gulfs between very rich and very poor, to increased extremes in left- and right-wing politics, and has deepened an already-entrenched binary oppositional thinking in creativity, nature, identity, and how we imagine the future itself, i.e., the extinction ending versus the techno-utopia. Binary oppositional thinking persists when people want simple, direct answers to complex questions. We are living in such a time when anxiety and grief over climate change have left many people with deep uncertainties about the future. How might an embrace of complexity and creativity help us transmute binary oppositional thinking in the face of these challenges? Through personal and scholarly narrative, this study addresses this question through an exploration of narrative experiences.

Keywords: digital; analog; binary; music; hauntology

1. Introduction: An Old Problem with a New Face

When I am overwhelmed by choices and problems, I want simple answers: go this way or go that way. I also recognize that this is only a starting point and that allowing for complexity is what can prevent me from oversimplifying things and can encourage creative solutions rather than keeping me locked in an either/or bind. Complicated times like these have only made binary oppositional thinking more appealing and more entrenched. Since its inception, Western culture has positioned and continues to position the mind as superior to the body in order for the mind to maintain supremacy and control over that which has been associated with the body and its essentialist trappings: the female/feminine, nature, animals, etc. Even though this idea is common knowledge, sadly, well into the twenty-first century, not much has changed.

At present, we are completely embedded in a digital reality. Over the last two decades in particular, binary oppositional thinking has increased alongside the increasing dominance of digital imperatives that allow very few, if any, choices to opt out. One well-documented reason for this is the ubiquitous social media, where one can feasibly never have to interact with anyone else who may think differently or in a more nuanced way. Social media is now a “place” that harbors extremist thinking, conspiracy theories, and oppositional politics that have been leading to violence in the “real” world. At the same time, this “place” has offered connection and creative opportunities for artists, writers, and musicians to be discovered, as well as to share their work with a wider audience. At a time when the digital has destabilized and decentralized modes of communication, the artist



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is in an interesting position, wherein some have completely rejected it, and others have embraced it wholesale.

Whether the purpose is positive or negative, the digital pulls its user/consumer (both dehumanizing terms) out of the necessary presence of idleness, the quiet daydreaming and wandering that all people need in order to connect with their emotional health and inherent creativity. The inception of AI has already engendered a crisis in what constitutes a creative work; artists such as comedian Sarah Silverman have drawn public attention to the question of the digital theft of creative material. As a writer and artist, I have lost opportunities because I am not on social media. The idea of being constantly “available” or “on call” creates anxiety for me, and the lack of privacy and addiction to constantly checking it moved me to remove it from my life. As a teacher, I was required to use an LMS (learning management system) that would leave my syllabi and assignments open to theft and a lack of privacy.

As consumers/citizens, we are required to interact with the digital every day in ways that we have no control over, including any financial transaction where we have to share our birthday, phone number, email address, etc., as well as facing risks related to data breaches in large institutions that hold our personal information, all to be sold to corporations that then sell it back to us. The same system that indoctrinated slavery sent armies west to slaughter Native Americans and has oppressed women, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ people also made nuclear bombs and factory farms that house untold suffering of billions of animals, and it stigmatizes those who suffer from mental illness.

Due to its constant accessibility, the digital provides the dead-but-never-decaying presence of the past, and because it only accumulates, it crowds out possibility. One effect of this is that in the midst of the often overwhelming, relentless pursuit of the digital—which ties us to screens, alerts, and being on-call plugged-in—many of us feel cut off from the natural world, from one another, and from the physicality of being human. The digital context, in asserting itself as the only option in the different ways we interact with, or “touch”, the world has contributed to a pervasive, deepening, and collective sense of anxiety about the future, paired with a sense of lost possibilities from previous ideas about the future (sourced in the pre-digital era). The appeal of analog technology at the moment that the digital, binary world has fully dominated the ways we communicate, learn, and experience the world may now coincide with a longing to experience the kind of physical connection to what we now call the analog technology of the pre-digital world.

The experience of holding a tape recorder or a Polaroid camera or handling a record player can generate a complex array of memories and associations that maybe relate to a time in which we never lived, if the technology pre-dates us, or a vision of how we want the world to be or to go back to: a time of relative slowness, or a sense of connection with the object, without being owned by/run by the object. In other words, we long for a sense of co-presence with our technologies, and by extension with each other—a co-presence that is impossible with the digital; no matter how “connected” we are, it is always going to be virtual. We know that the analog will not return as long as the digital does not crash. We live in analog memory through the “retro”, through consuming films and television shows that are set before the turn of the twenty-first century and through the digital itself. For example, on YouTube, we can watch commercials for analog products and experience the “crackle” of a record or an old film. Through the digital, however, which is a dead medium, these analog things have no context and therefore are dead, too.

How do we move beyond or through the limiting and often destructive mode of binary oppositional thinking in a world that seems to be defined by it? I think of the word “transformation” and the way it plays upon intriguing ideas about moving and shifting: across meaning, across shapes, across formations, across time, in stories, and in life. In her

2002 text, *Toward a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Rosi Braidotti issues a crucial invitation, or challenge: “The old mind–body liaison needs to be reconstructed in terms which are not nationally driven, top-down, and hierarchical. Processes, flows, in-between-states have to be taken into account. . . . The point is not to know who we are, but rather what, at last, we want to become, how to represent mutations, changes, and transformations” (Braidotti 2002, p. 63). I wonder if this reconstruction, which also carries within it a deconstruction, is the key to challenging binary oppositional thinking at a time when we feel most stuck in, or locked into, a digital reality that we did not create.

The “old mind–body liaison” has in fact have become more entrenched with the inception of, and now dominance of, the digital. A possible way to resist, or at least respond, to binary oppositional thinking, especially in such a polarizing time, is, as Braidotti suggests, to bring a deeper awareness to processes—that is, to making and creating: to cultivate an approach to each other, to art, and to life that is based on mutuality, not objectification, and to move beyond this or that, one or zero, yes or no, masculine or feminine. Under the terms summarized above, “the body” is still, as of this writing, in binary oppositional thinking, the province of the “feminine”, as something to be tamed and manipulated to serve the illusory superiority of the mind. This illusion is the very subject of all horror films, which place trauma at their center, and it is why they remain as popular as they are, especially now. In addition, the increased awareness and visibility of non-binary and trans individuals beautifully undermines the current condition of binary oppositional thinking.

The systems that maintain binary oppositional thinking are crumbling—but the process is ugly and scary and feels chaotic because it pulls us into the unknown: of monuments and structures that this system has left and is leaving behind. The digital provides many distractions from the reality and necessity of death, as it constantly demands our attention, it is designed to be addictive, and it opens us to unlimited distraction from what is happening right in front of us. Everything that humans have ignored or disavowed in the name of the fantasy and phantasm of progress as they were envisioned in the twentieth century is coming back to pollute and haunt, because the digital cannot decay. These returns are harbingers of extinction—ours and those of the other species that we take down with us as climate change hurries everything along. As these harbingers accumulate, they invite us to confront the cultural fear of and avoidance of death that is at the root of binary oppositional thinking.

Yet these returns are also invitations to beauty—to love what remains and to find ways to help one another let go of our hopes and expectations of what we were taught to believe about the future: that all progress means we are moving toward something “better”. I offer this essay as a way to more deeply explore the significance of the emergence of hauntology as both a liberating and limited aesthetic in the early 2000s and the gifts of the analog world; its technologies, art, and music; and how it informs the current digital reality.

2. “The Power of Haunted Things”: The Gifts and Limits of Hauntology

The first decades of the twenty-first century have been characterized by a high-definition version of the twentieth century, where the time in which we now live has moved us forward, but culturally we are stuck, lost in a sea of remakes, sequels, cover after cover song, and stories that keep pulling us back to the same universes, over and over. We can perceive this through the awareness of “a sense of cluttered, or blocked time, flattened time with no forward momentum. What’s disappeared is a sense of difference—of the specificity of the culture belonging to a moment” (Fisher 2014b). In *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Hauntology, Depression, and Lost Futures*, writer and music critic Mark Fisher, who wrote under the name “K-Punk”, argues that the present is haunted by “the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate” (Fisher 2014a, p. 16). One clear

example of this is the terrorist attacks on 9/11: in the United States, especially in New York City, the center of commerce and all the upward, progress-driven qualities of late-stage capitalism, the collapse of the World Trade Center at the literal dawn of the twenty-first century paradoxically destroyed and ushered in a period of binary oppositional thinking that emerged with the digital. Further, scholars from Fredric Jameson to Fernando Gros argued that 9/11 marked the end of postmodernism. Whether or not that is the case, it definitely ushered in an intense feeling of being at a distinctive point of no return.

Fisher described the experience of mourning the past inside the present as “hauntology”, which is distinguished by its gesture of mourning the futures we were taught to anticipate in the late modernist era (post-World War II). For Fisher, the “future” that was hoped to be progressive, egalitarian, and technologically ethical was absorbed into the maw of capitalism and consumerism under the sign of global, neo-liberalism, which is characterized by the widening gulf between rich and poor, and technology is a tool to enslave rather than liberate. The late 1990s and early 2000s offered an assortment of post-modern films that addressed anxieties about a future of digital dominance, enslavement, relentless surveillance technology, the reliability of memory and identity, and corporations replacing governments. Such films include, among others, *The Matrix* (1999), *12 Monkeys* (1995), *Minority Report* (2002), *The Fifth Element* (1997), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Being John Malkovich* (1999), *Memento* (2000) and *The Truman Show* (1998). On the cusp of analog and digital, these films embody the complexities inherent in navigating the mind–body connection at a time when what once seemed stable (the past’s understanding of what the future would become) was crumbling.

Fisher’s use of the word hauntology is based on Jacques Derrida’s play on the word “ontology” in *Spectres of Marx*, wherein both words, pronounced in French, sound alike. The proximity of the two words’ pronunciations calls attention to the ways that they flood into each other: whereas “ontology” is the study of the nature of being, or presence, “hauntology” is the study of absence, or the sense of the past as ghosts that haunt the present. Derrida argued that after the fall of communism, capitalism would always be “haunted” by communism’s potential. While locked in the binary oppositional thinking that the digital world demands from us, we cannot move forward without examining the way(s) that the past calls us backwards (Derrida 1994).

Hauntology is not a genre of art or music, but an aesthetic effect that can be applied to, or be, a way of reading and appreciating art and music that is informed by the mourning of a future that modernism anticipated but that did not arrive. The notion of the end or failure of history is one reason that Derrida’s theory on hauntology continues to resonate in the twenty-first century and why “haunting... can be construed as a failed mourning. It is about refusing to give up the ghost or—and this can sometimes amount to the same thing—the refusal of the ghost to give up on us” (Fisher 2014a, p. 22). Not to be confused with a fascination with “retro” or “vintage” kitsch, hauntology is characterized by a preoccupation “with the way in which technology [generates] memory—[through] a fascination with television, vinyl records, audio tape, and with the sounds of these technologies breaking down” (Whyman 2019). Hauntology’s chief concern is the sublime of the past—its beauty, horror, and what they can teach us.

The emergence of hauntology in the mid-2000s coincides with the increasing dominance of the digital world in daily human life. Most writing on hauntology (post-Derrida) originated in England in the wake of 9/11. In her discussion of the major films, including *Cloverfield* (2008) and *Reign Over Me* (2007) that followed 9/11 depicting disaster as a spectacle and utilizing an array of digital effects, critic Georgina Banita observes that the Twin Towers’ “cathartic role [was] greatly enhanced by the infinite dispersal of perception occasioned by the attacks, which occurred precisely at the historical juncture effecting the

transition from analog to digital representation” (Banita 2014, p. 101). The 2001 terrorist attacks accompanied, and seemed to accelerate, the shift to a digitally dominated world. Cementing the primacy of the 24 h news cycle, the attacks were played over and over on the news and now are available to be seen over and over on the internet—on countless screens, in countless ways.

Further, the Twin Towers in particular are the most vivid analog objects that signify a boldly optimistic approach to “the future” as a progress-fulfilled time. The Towers were symbols of the triumph of capitalism, commerce, and wealth. Visually off-putting, yet sublime, their massive size and power were in the fact of their “twoness”. They represented a binary near-mirror-reflection, two “ones”, north and south. In “Requiem for the Twin Towers”, Jean Baudrillard writes, “Imagine if only one had collapsed: the effect would not have been the same at all” (Baudrillard 2012, p. 33). Their utter destruction, complete with the horror of falling bodies and the eerie presence in the absence of one tower after the first one fell, the gaping hole and the piles of steel and ash, ushered in a strange era that continues to affect the present. Every photograph and television show or film that pre-dates 9/11 is now a ghost story. Every perfect blue sky in early September is now uncanny. As Banita points out: “spectral reverberations of 9/11 intertwine and play off each other to produce a hybrid homage not to a supposed terror ‘original’ but to a schizophrenic, transtraumatic culture that is both marked by the 9/11 tragedy and unmoved by it, both obsessed with recovering the innocence of ‘before’ and intensely anticipating a redeeming ‘after’” (Banita 2014, p. 97). This binary condition that paradoxically calls for complexity is a component of hauntology that concerns the “constant inability of society to break free of self-reference [to the past]” (Mendelson 2019).

Nearly twenty-five years later, 9/11 feels more and more like history, even to those who remember that day: a “past inside the present”. In the hand-held flip-phone camera films from that day, I now recognize a “pre-millennial” fashion style: basic French blues, baggy business khakis, blazers, lots of black and gray. In the 2016 film *102 Minutes that Changed America*, a film made completely of surveillance camera footage and citizen-witness footage, with no soundtrack and no voice-over, there is a striking eeriness in the real-time unfolding of that morning in New York City (*102 Minutes that Changed America* 2016). At one point, surveillance cameras near what would become ground zero capture Muzak playing Billy Joel’s “She’s Always a Woman” and the Bee Gees’ “How Deep is Your Love”, as bodies fall from one of the towers. In this juxtaposition, binaries collapse into horrific complexity and juxtaposition: the silence, the banal, the sublime, and death blend together into an unspeakable, traumatic event that can never be unseen:

The power of these haunted things would...explain why the remains of the World Trade Center—its wrecked steel and ductwork and piping and shiny aluminum siding—would never be dealt with quite rationally. The immeasurable importance of those remains, the preciousness of the messages they carried from the inferno on September 11, could not be confronted squarely without facing the howls of the dead in every buckled strut or beam that had once sheltered humanity. (Glanz and Lipton 2003, p. 336)

The deep mourning that the day required—let alone the exploration of deep questions, the healing of deep traumas that cut just as deeply today—was cut short by a quick and massive patriotic imperative, the quick repression on the news circuit of images of falling bodies, and then the rise of hate crimes and discrimination against any citizen from the Middle East and the quick pivot to war. On the other side of the binary were those who rejected anything that sported the ubiquitous American flag and the voices who expressed no sympathy for the nearly 3000 innocent lives lost. Christopher Vanderwees bluntly observes that “images of falling bodies [including Richard Drew’s haunting photo, ‘Falling

Man’]. . . were banned in the days following 9/11, [because] the reality of falling bodies cannot assimilate the post-9/11 narrative of victory culture [and] American exceptionalism” (Vanderwees 2014, p. 237). The complexities were lost amid binary oppositional thinking and behavior, yet complexities and reverberations continue to be felt in the form of 9/11-related deaths and illnesses of those who worked in the thick of ground zero and those who have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Meanwhile, and as a result of the events of 9/11, the United States is constantly at war, and political divisions have only deepened. Reflecting on these effects of 9/11 five years after, Judith Butler writes, “[A] rise of censorship and anti-intellectualism. . . took hold in the fall of 2001 when anyone who sought to understand the ‘reasons’ [complexities] for the attack on the United States was regarded as someone who sought to ‘exonerate’ those who conducted that attack” (Butler 2004, p. xiii). The events of 9/11 defied the Cartesian split—but nationalism (“Americanism”) re-established it, as well as exploiting the binary between feeling and thinking and forestalling the necessary mourning that is implicit in the act of being haunted. Instead, “post 9/11 political games manufactured a pervasive fear of the exterior ‘other’ while paying too little attention to the otherness within—the confrontation with uncanny remnants and specters of the attacks” (Banita 2014, p. 96). The attacks obviously affected both mind and body, as trauma destroys and complicates binaries: a third thing emerges in the destruction, a space a margin, a gap, that was always there between the two towers.

In *102 Minutes*, different camera perspectives show the towers at various angles, showing the second plane hitting the south tower three or four times, and the soundtrack is silence. Between each segment, the video dissolves into static, which creates a haunting effect, because it harks back to a pre-digital, VHS medium that was fading at the time of the attacks, and the scrambled gray/black vertical lines evoke the twin towers—themselves analog objects. The static signifies decay, loss, and the deep silence of something that cannot be reversed: death itself. On the actual day of the attacks, I had seen a brief image of the first tower’s gaping hole on my little television set right before I shut it off and drove to campus to teach a class; in the classroom, my students’ cell phones all seemed to go off at once, and after I dismissed everyone, I walked out into the eerily quiet, sunny day. Everyone was inside, watching television. Later, I would watch the events unfold in real time on CNN on a jumbo screen in a Korean restaurant. In 2004, I would visit New York City for the first time, my first impression one of exiting the subway in the middle of ground zero, literally in a hole, smelling of deep, dank earth, evoking the grave.

Unlike anything analog, the digital does not and cannot decay. Forever limited to ones and zeroes, it cannot die because it has always been dead. From this zombie state, it persists in deepening the binary opposition in the way we think about creativity, nature, identity, and the future itself. What decays has value in that we know that it will not be around forever. Therefore, our sense of time sharpens. It is arguably more possible to *feel* time, through technology itself—from reading a book that we hold in our hands to listening to a Walkman cassette deck that we have to turn over in order to hear the other side. The digital forecloses this tactile element by diluting our relationship with the objects themselves. In the case of hauntology, as Banita argues, when it is applied to a specific place, locale, or object, *through* the digital, it is swept up into “infinite mechanical reproduction in the media” (Banita 2014, p. 95). I watched *102 Minutes* on my smartphone—and though I watched closely, earnestly, moved and horrified by the images unfolding there, I also experienced a vertiginous sense of being unmoored, muted, un-embodied—a feeling I now recognize as being haunted.

The collapse of the World Trade Center continues to haunt with the towers’ absence, through more recent television shows (such as David Simon’s HBO series, *The Deuce*, which

aired from 2017–2019) whose stories are set in the period of late modernism/postmodernism that makes up the WTC's existence: 1970–2001. The analog technology of this period, as well as trends in music, art, and film, was evolving quickly, so much so that the distinctions between these three decades are unmistakable in the innovations and movements that emerged from them (punk, grunge, jungle, new wave, rap, etc.) as well as the technologies that were part of their various sounds.

When we use analog technology or experience otherwise analog objects, we are actively part of the physical presence of the thing itself. For example, slide projectors and other forms of analog technology widely used through the 1960s and 1970s create a feeling of “fading modernism”—a ghostly reversal of a Polaroid photograph developing. As with the scratch of a record, the mechanical sounds of photographs clicking past us, the view of dust mites rising up from the light and heat of the projector, along with the images themselves, add up to a feeling of being haunted not just by the memory of the event inside the photograph—but of the experience of the technology itself. According to David Sax, author of *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why they Matter*, “The experience of listening to [and playing] a record was less efficient. It all involved more of our physical senses, requiring the use of our hands, feet, eyes, ears, and even mouth, as we blew dust from the record's surface” (Sax 2016, p. xiii).

Crackle is perhaps the most clear example of a “hauntological sound”, and represents a meeting place for the threads mentioned above. When we hear the sound of crackle layered within, on top of, or below the sound of the music on a record, we are reminded “of the technological means by which [the] capturing of time was made possible” (Fisher 2013, pp. 48–49). The handling of this technology requires the whole body to be involved and, in the case of record players, reflects the body's co-presence in the names of the equipment. Turntables have two arms: one, the “over arm”, that literally holds a vinyl record above the player, and the “tone arm”, with a needle on the end, that delicately engages the sound from the record itself. In this capturing of time, crackle “unsettles the very distinction between surface and depth, between background and foreground, [and as such,] connotes the return of a certain sense of loss. At the same time, it is also the sign of a found (audio) object, the indication that we are in a scavenger's space” (Fisher 2014a, p. 144). We recognize these spaces as resale shops, dusty garages, forgotten closets, and basements.

At the heart of a fascination with the analog is the idea that what the digital diminishes we hope that the analog will restore: a sense of bodily connection with the objects of the everyday. Looking at a photo of a loved one—a photo that has been scanned and uploaded to a website—is different than the experience of holding the original photograph, maybe reading the handwriting on the back (my mother always wrote down the dates and the people in the photo, and sometimes would write funny captions), maybe holding it up to smell the paper. In my mother's photography, the blur of her thumb or finger could sometimes be seen in the corner of the frame. The hand was literalized as a family joke, as ghosts exist in the realm of what we do not remember—and the analog assists in our remembering by conjuring and putting us back in touch with ghosts again. The ache for a place, real or imagined, gives way to hauntology when we begin to investigate how we can create a relationship with what is absent.

When I consider the analog as not just a predecessor but as a relief from the digital, it strikes me how important wheels and gears are to the deployment of sound and vision coming out of analog technology—wheels in the tape recorder, in the VHS cassette, in the workings of the Sony Walkman, in the turntable, in the film strip, in my the mixed tapes that I made in the 1980s, and in the presence of other wheels—that, as they turn, unmoor the ghosts of memory, longing and imagination—the childhood comfort of being rocked back and forth, spinning bicycle tires, spinning records, the clatter of reel-to-reel movies,

scrambled tape loops—all within the greater wheel of time and the shifting of seasons, births and deaths, the awareness that life is a series of circles and not a straight line—and with that the feeling that life goes on without us.

Where it is expressed in art and music, hauntology's aesthetic exposes the way that the digital removes us from the real, or analog, world while also compelling us to long for it. In an elegant essay on hauntology in the world of art, film, and music, critic Adam Harper observes that "since the late twentieth century, as DVD, digital radio, digital recording cameras, digital television and mobile phones were coming onto the scene, noisy ghosts started coming out of videotapes (*The Ring*, 2002), analogue radio (*Frequency*, 2000), cameras (*Shutter*, 2008), telephones (*One Missed Call*, 2003) and even the internet (*Pulse*, 2001)" (Harper 2009, p. 53). These "noisy ghosts" abound in the narratives of film and television from this period but also exist in the technology itself—in the "flaws" that we see so clearly in analog formats that are masked and virtually eliminated in digital technology: crackle on a record, the warped sound of cassette tape decaying, or any "non-edited" sound from the outside coming in. Harper points out that "hauntology doesn't merely show or recall an image of the past, it shows the present—or more specifically, it shows the past as it exists and is perceived from inside the present" (53). The analog sounds characteristic of hauntology now are all the more vivid; due to our digital saturation, we can better appreciate and recognize sounds: crackle from a record, decaying and warped cassette tapes, and the inclusion of sounds that feel at once like they are part of the listening experience, and also somehow apart from it.

The presence of hauntology in music, or a "hauntological sound" was introduced, or discovered, around 2006, when "spectrality started to emerge as a theme—and a practice" (Fisher 2013, p. 45). Simon Reynolds explains that hauntological music "resolves the contradictions of retro-futurism by imagining that his music still is the future, somehow: a bridge to tomorrow that was never finished but just hangs there in space, poised, pointing to something out-of-reach and unattainable" (Reynolds 2011, p. 394). Noted most often in British electronic music, hauntology also suggested itself as the most fitting classificatory label for some producers who did not obviously belong to an existing genre, such as The Caretaker and the artists on the Ghost Box label. The musicians that are most often associated with hauntology and have been most written about are contemporary and predominantly British artists that emerged in the 1990s, like the Boards of Canada, Burial, The Caretaker, Little Axe, Ariel Pink, and Tricky. One of the things that these artists have in common is the foreground of the sound of vinyl crackle, enacted as a deliberate gesture. Fisher describes the "hauntological sound" as being "preoccupied with the way in which technology materialized memory—hence a fascination with television, vinyl records, audiotape, and with the sounds of these technologies breaking down" (Fisher 2014a, p. 21).

Hauntological music is distinguished by modern "technologies that made us all ghosts", and postmodernity could be defined as the succumbing of historical time to the spectral time of recording devices. Postmodern time presupposes ubiquitous recording technology, but digital postmodernity screens out, smooths out, the "ghostliness" and naturalizes the uncanniness of the recording apparatuses. Hauntology slows us down and restores the uncanniness of recording by making the recorded surface audible again, reminding us of how electronic sounds produced between the 1950s and the 1990s remain sonic signifiers of the future—and, as such, they are signs that "the anticipated future never actually arrived" (Reynolds 2017). One key example of this quality is the electronic artists Boards of Canada, who are brothers Michael Sandison and Marcus Eoin. Their name is taken from the National Film Board of Canada, which aired nature documentaries in the 1970s that influenced them. The brothers spent part of their childhood in Canada, in the country, inspired by the nature and children's educational programming they watched

while growing up. Much of their music is based on their experiences exploring the outdoors as children, their love of nature, history, mathematics—all in the form of a partially remembered and felt ecological memory.

This 1970s—and the faded memories of it—is a decade made of disintegrating loops, the sense of circles, merry-go-rounds, bicycles, spinning toys, objects in free-fall, technologies whose energies are generated by the momentum of wheels and gears. Boards of Canada's music haunts because, unlike other music I have listened to, their music hints at extinction, and amid the carefree, nature-centered world of childhood, there is also a sense of dread, danger, and darkness. Their music spirits me away via the imagery it evokes, all form an aural punctum that engenders a complex mixture of longing, comfort, sadness, wonder, exhilaration.

Noted as one of the best electronic albums of the 1990s, BoC's 1998 album, *Music Has the Right to Children* was released while "the reigning aesthetic in electronic music was crisply digital, frenetically hyper-rhythmic, and futuristic" (Reynolds 2018). What made it distinctive was its embrace of an older sound made new via a mixture of analog and digital techniques that "give their music a wavering, mottled quality redolent of formats like film, vinyl, and magnetic tape that are susceptible to decay and distortion with the passage of time" (Reynolds 2018). Their use of analog technology when recording often merges with the inclusion of the unscripted sounds of nature. When recording the album, they left the windows open—so in several songs on the album, we can hear sparrows chirping, seagulls calling, or a plane flying in the distance. These sounds invite the listener to recall the quality of decay that distinguishes the analog as a source of rootedness in time and place. Even younger listeners have said that the music makes them remember a time in which they never lived.

Though it explores the same themes as *Music Has the Right to Children*, 2002's *Geogaddi's* tone is much darker, even sinister at times. The duo made the album in the five months after 9/11, after "the ghosts of the Cold War past had returned to haunt the supposed victors. If the nineties had suggested a glimpse at the ultimate triumph of Enlightenment, 9/11 had confirmed the famous assertion of Horkheimer and Adorno that 'the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity'" (Lahmann 2014). *Geogaddi* also embodied, through its sonic ecology, the loss of something bigger: a sense of utopia as a consideration of the future.

A key problem with hauntology is its depressive, dead-end approach. Fisher himself wrote about hauntology in the context of his own depression, to which he succumbed in 2017. While it is important to learn from the past in order not to repeat it (a lesson that humanity must keep learning), I wonder if as artists and writers we are being invited to cope differently with what is happening on Earth than what we have been used to. When we are confused, overwhelmed, too sad for words, on the edge of collapse, shaking in our bones—we need time to sit with it all and stop "progressing". Those who espouse hauntology are perhaps the humanities' corollary to what a colleague in biology once told me about her own field: that at this point, "we are just cataloguing the decline". For biologists, that means that all they can do is witness, count, and take note of the species and landscapes that are disappearing due to climate change. For those of us in the humanities, hauntological approaches to art keep us stuck in the mire of doom, depression, and loss. While these conditions and feelings are no doubt present and important, we must also acknowledge that there is something else happening, too, something below hauntology, below decline: something joyous, something bold, something that has always been available to us: imagination and complexity.

3. Conclusions: Imagining Beyond the Binary

The limit of hauntology as an aesthetic and approach to the digital present is its beautiful, yet dead-ended, obsession with a past that has never settled. Whatever remains unresolved in the present will continue to haunt all futures. Regardless, creative people have been both looking to the past and envisioning a different kind of future through their art, for as long as they have been aware of their oppression. What artists seek is connection: with imagination and inspiration, with people, animals, and the tools that they use to create. Where hauntology espouses a mourning for the futures that we were promised but that did not materialize, an artist does not wait for the future to “arrive” before they express themselves. Artists create as if they might die tomorrow; they create as if that future were already here.

The Real of the present breaks through daily now: nature, everyday, growing crises of water, energy, food, and more common disasters that create climate change refugees; the pandemic; mental health; and breakdowns in economic bureaucracy. We cannot singlehandedly dismantle what we depend upon for survival, even if it is killing us. The binary imperative of the illusory, dead world of the digital pulls our attention away from what is happening to us; it fills us with anxiety when we do not engage with or plug ourselves into it, and it does not allow the space for stillness, idleness, and rest that is essential to creative thought, sensing real time, and being present to the necessary grief that is our guide toward any chance of healing our Earth home. However, a wholesale rejection of the digital is not possible at this point. What creative possibilities, then, can exist in such a world? What can the humanities offer at this time, to help guide us toward that healing, should we choose it?

Now it is time for the poets, the artists, the storytellers—those who complicate the binary. Well into the twenty-first century, we can see that there are artists who are doing just that. One such individual is Kim Dracula, a transgender musician and performance artist who surfaced in 2022. When asked what genre of music they write and perform, Kim Dracula replied, “All of them. With lipstick”. Born in 1997 in Hobart, Tasmania, Samuel Wellings changed their name to reflect their art., Their music is hard to describe, and that is why I love it. Kim Dracula’s music combines bossa nova, deathcore, trap metal, ska, drum n’ bass, nu metal, rap, and jazz, among others. Kim Dracula rose to popularity from TikTok for their nu metal cover of Lady Gaga’s “Paparazzi”. Their original song, “Make Me Famous”, launched Dracula’s debut album, *A Gradual Decline in Morale* (2023).

I discovered Kim Dracula in the summer of 2023 on YouTube, when a friend sent me a link to the song and video, “Seventy Thorns”, which is on *Gradual Decline*. It features Jonathan Davis of Korn, a popular nu metal band in the 1990s and 2000s, for the chorus: “I want to be the one who hurts you. . . I want to be the one who cares. . . Feelings intense, they’re hard to swallow/It feeds the fear. . .” The song begins with jazz, scat, wildly shifts into trap metal, slides into rap, and just flies from there. I was surprised by how exhilarated I felt when I heard it; I played it over and over. The energy of the song and video is full of surprise, and takes you on a fun ride through genre twists and turns, repeats, and flows into a full, growling chorus. Likewise, Dracula’s gender fluidity is confident, defiant, and full of humor.

Influences and references abound in Kim Dracula’s music; there is also a strong sense of catharsis. When I listen, I think about how for so many years the musical landscape has felt crowded, watered down with remakes/covers and derivative, forgettable songs, and I am struck by how completely Kim Dracula is in a world of their own. Their bright purple hair flows across their shoulders, framing a wildly expressive face, sometimes impeccably made up to look “femme”, sometimes demonic, sometimes zombie-like. For me, the music is the most cathartic sound I’ve heard in a long time: it is exciting in a horror-esque way,

soulful, and above all, playful. When I saw the video I wanted to send it to all of my friends. It awakened something in me: a joyful rage, the stirrings of audacity, of coming out, of allowing my rage to dance with humor, of accepting the invitation to unravel.

Kim Dracula's music emerged out of the margins, out of the blighted space of "the flesh-eating diseases and torrential wildfires of Australia" (Dracula 2025). People discovered and spread the word about Dracula's music through Tik Tok and YouTube, and many are drawn to the idea that "Dracula", as an icon of gothic horror, is a figure of contamination, disease, and contagion. They write and perform from a space of disaster and a sense of apocalypse and ecological grief. From this space, using digital technology as a medium for composing their own music, Kim Dracula creates turbulent, creative art that mirrors, through a bold rearrangement, the chaotic, complicated world we inhabit.

Kim Dracula, and others born into and/or creating within the digital reality, remind us that complexity is a muscle of the mind that we need to keep using if we want to challenge and break open the limits of binary thinking—all binaries. As figures of study in the humanities, they remind us that creation and destruction are both creative and that transformation through collage at once signifies and *is* the middle and *is* change and complexity; it is also motion and *in* motion, and as such, it resists hegemonic language and the thought-patterns that (re)produce it. This resistance, however expressed—via humor, story, silence, art, violence, or grief—is critical to the imagination in the face of binary oppositional thinking under a digital "regime".

Kim Dracula represents a "becoming" that is essential to the work of cultivating complexity in this strange time where fear is the primary drive to keep us in the bind of binary oppositional thinking. We are always invited to create and share new stories, to reimagine how to write, make music and art, and live. In addition, we can also embrace wonder, and joy, and rest in the awareness of not knowing, and cultivate the importance of complexity and systems, from the ecological to the political. The time of father-worship, binary-normativity, and war-worship is ending, even though it may not feel like it. Even if this does not happen in our lifetime, one way or another, the planet will teach us about these endings. We do not have to go blindly into the future, caving in to the pressures and lack of choices that the digital will continue to demand, as long as binary oppositional thinking dominates it. We can remember that creativity is a gift that is available to everyone, and it offers us a chance to move, with quickened heartbeats, deeper into this stunning, damaged world.

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