Life, Death, and Television:

Deconstructing the Small Screen with Danny Brown

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis investigates our current cultural impasse—the "slow cancellation of the future"—through the unearthing of visuals, sounds, and technologies of televisual artifacts and aesthetics that is authored and performed using strategies in hybridity, pastiche, and repetition of pop culture iconography of the past. In the postmodern climate of resurrecting content of our past, we also unearth hidden contexts that continue to haunt in our collapsed time. Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist method of hauntology, as adapted by contemporary media theorist Mark Fisher, speculates new constructions of meaning through notions of history, memory and identity by operating within the gaps and traces of ruptured time. Hauntology is an attempt to identify these paradoxes and to destabilize and undermine the binaries that represent our foundational perspectives and practices. Through this conceptual strategy, the television reveals itself as an uncanny technologized space of both play and disruption, where the past simultaneously defines and interrupts the present.

My central research involves examining the televisual spaces in two music videos by Detroit rap artist Danny Brown. By placing himself into simulated televisual spaces of the past, Brown is able to speculate different meanings in the present by uncovering and exposing the contradictions that the smooth operation of our larger ideological system actively tries to repress. These videos, released under Brown's 2016 album *Atrocity Exhibition*, transcend beyond nostalgic desire and into a surreal technologized simulation where the boundaries between time and history, self and Other, and past and present are forgotten, remembered, and reimagined.

Keywords: Danny Brown, Jacques Derrida, Mark Fisher, hip-hop, hauntology, uncanny, Detroit, television

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Contemporary popular culture is curiously marked by a temporal crisis—we can only express our present through images of the past, and our past can only be expressed through the discourse of the present. Every cultural acquisition today embodies a vague but pervasive feeling of the past without recalling any specific moment in history. The anachronistic slippage of distinct time periods into one another through recursive cultural production represents a gradual yet persistent mode in which our society's psychological perception of the future has been deteriorating over the last thirty years. The late 1970s and early 1980s began to show signs of cultural atemporality, but it was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that this temporal disjunction became something of a defining characteristic in popular culture.

Decades prior, theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Frederic Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio and Félix Guattari had argued how ceaseless economic instability and the immediate turnover of ephemeral images ultimately leads to a failure of any coherent sense of temporality. At the time, Jameson had described this impasse of postmodern culture as the inability to find forms adequate in expressing the present, and thus, unable to anticipate a sense of new futures, as

the "cultural logic of late capitalism."[1] He writes, "we [are] unable today to focus on our own present, as though we had become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience. But if that is so, then it is a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself—or, at the very least, an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history."[2] This inability would define the deterioration of our current generation's social imagination, which lacks "the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live."[3] The disappearance of the future and accepting that culture would continue without much change also implied the political climate would be reduced to the established capitalist system. Contemporary theorists such as Mark Fisher, Simon Reynolds and Franco "Bifo" Berardi have continued these studies into the present, where capitalism's effects have only accelerated since the 1980s. Fisher coined "capitalist realism" to explain "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."[4] Capitalist realism derives its power from capitalism's conversion of cultural objects of the past into aesthetic objects with monetary value—this turn from belief to aesthetics, "from engagement to spectatorship,"[5] is considered one of capitalist realism's main attributes. Understanding how late capitalism subsumes and exhumes all cultural elements—including our nostalgic "memories"—begins to reveal how capitalism both feeds on and reproduces the moods of populations.

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[1] Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998): 10.
[2] Ibid., 10.
[3] Mark Fisher, "What is Hauntology," *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (2012): 16.
[4] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero Books, 2009): 2.
[5] Ibid., 4.

The temporal disjunction that defines our present cultural landscape goes beyond the postmodern redistribution of aural and visual artifacts and, instead, creates a recursive mode where media is locked into formal nostalgia. This cultural impasse leaves little room for critical distance in art, as capitalism has learned to appropriate critical viewpoints and diminish subversive activity, reframing them to serve the dominant ideology. As televisual and digital technologies in the late twentieth century promised a new hybrid of individual and social in new spaces and modes of existence, it has only produced all of the old relations of power, subsequently trapping new generations of consumers in their own idea of progress.

Since the early 2000s, American music culture has successfully embodied this temporal pathology to a degree where today's popular music releases could easily exist in a decade of the past without a disorienting effect on its audience. Just in the past few years, popular artists spanning across different genres such as Lana Del Ray, Ariana Grande, Chance the Rapper, Adele, Bruno Mars, Charli XCX and WAVVES have maintained an atemporal aesthetic through aural and visual appropriation of the past. Fisher writes: "Music culture is in many ways paradigmatic of the fate of culture under post-Fordist capitalism. At the level of form, music is locked into pastiche and repetition. But its infrastructure has been subject to massive, unpredictable change."[6] Indeed, the past modes of consumption and distribution have adapted with new technologies, but the stasis of form in music culture plays an integral role in conjuring a familiar world—one in which we are being conditioned to "accept consumer capitalism's model of ordinariness."[7]

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[6] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Alresford Hants: Zero Books, 2014): 16.

[7] Ibid., 27.

Surely, our predicament is not as bleak as I have described—but how do we find the traces of possibilities in the new when all we have is recycled pop culture detritus? My analysis of our non-times is explored through the aural and visual expression of American rapper Danny Brown. In 2016, Brown released his fourth studio album, *Atrocity Exhibition*: two music videos released with singles from this album, "Ain't It Funny" and "When It Rain," are surreal reimaginings of our atemporality through the aesthetics of a dated television recording. Brown oscillates between times, technologies and identities provided by popular culture, creating indexes of televisual familiarity to occupy and dismantle.

Both of Danny Brown's videos I have chosen to analyze provide representations of televisual culture in the late-twentieth century. These aural and visual sources are directly linked to various theoretical realms I am investigating, the primary being our generation's continuous aesthetic regression to the past, and the traces of the present in representations of the past. My research involves Brown's sampling of aural and visual culture through the media archive, specifically his use of televisual aesthetics, in order to disrupt spectral notions of myth and meaning. While much of Brown's performative content and aesthetic is fitting to my theoretical research, his music videos "Ain't It Funny" and "When It Rain" are my primary focus. By examining the intertextual narrative of recorded technological artifacts within these music videos, I unearth a critical approach to aural and visual strategies that both occupy and haunt our present cultural zeitgeist. Further, my analysis ruminates on Brown's construction of a metaphorical technologized time and space that allows him to communicate his perception of identity and place. I argue that Brown's aural and visual content in the form of radical speculative fiction reflects many of the anxieties living under twenty-first century capitalism—a

surreal admission of nothing is ever entirely itself and embracing the paradox that allows it to continue being.

Literature Review

In my analysis, it is necessary that I situate Danny Brown in the current landscape of hip-hop culture through scholarship in hip-hop studies. The field of hip-hop studies is fairly new, filling a void in scholarship across disciplines in its contribution towards cultural theory. Beginning just after the new millennium, hip-hop studies is described as a field which "encompasses sociology, anthropology, communication studies, religious studies, cultural studies, critical race theory, and psychology in a multidisciplinary area of study."[8] Over the last decade, the scholarship surrounding hip-hop studies has rapidly evolved in order to cover its increasing complexity of issues, thus absorbing the disciplines of "gender studies, critical race theory, communication and rhetoric studies, psychology, sociology anthropology, ethnomusicology, popular culture studies, and religious studies."[9] Hip-hop's multidisciplinary area of study—"much like the polyvocal and multiplicative culture of Hip Hop—it is not one, but rather, many things"[10]— has earned its quest for enhanced academic reflection. Theorists including Nelson George, S. Craig Watkins, Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal have not only strengthened this subject by providing social portraits of its historical settings, but further argue its legitimacy within the Western pop culture scene.

In "'Represent': Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music," Murray Forman cites space and place as important elements that influence the formation of identity within hip-hop culture: "Rap

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[8]Monica Miller, Daniel White-Hodge, Jeffrey Coleman, and Cassandra D. Chaney, "The Hip in Hip Hop: Toward a Discipline in Hip Hop Studies." *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 9.
[9] Ibid., 9.
[10] Ibid., 9.

music is one of the main sources within popular culture of a sustained and in-depth examination

and analysis of the spatial partitioning of place and the diverse experiences of being young and

Black in America."[11] While these localized practices of the self tend to manifest in different

ways, where these individuals are from is essential to their identity. Forman's analysis of place,

accompanied by Richard Pope, Thomas J. Sugrue and Jerry Herron's scholarship, begins to take

form in understanding the relevance of Danny Brown in his relationship to Detroit.

In the last decade, scholarly contributions towards audiovisual content of contemporary

rap music have mostly oscillated around a handful of primary members of the industry's elite,

such as Beyonce (Knowles), Jay-Z, Kanye West and Eminem. These individuals whose public

personas have been shaped by corporate media represent the totality of hip-hop culture and

influence in society, and as a result, many other acts and facets of hip-hop culture are obscured.

While many theorists have used these individuals' personas and work to analyze intersections of

race, feminism, place, space, history, and capitalism, the cultural shift from corporate to

independent sensibilities and the pervasiveness of digital media technologies are slowly

widening a gap among the favored subjects and figures of contemporary music studies.

Scholarship that addresses this gap, and discovers members of the emerging, independent and

alternative rap scene, is still as varied as it is scarce—there is not currently any significant

academic literature on Danny Brown. My thesis addresses this lack, and, relatedly, critiques the

past figures of corporate sponsorship and representation that made rap culture collapse in the

2000s.

Both of Danny Brown's videos provide visual representations of the past. These media

sources are directly linked to various theoretical realms I am investigating, the primary being our

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[11]Murray Forman, "'Represent': Race, Space, and Place in Rap Music," *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, Eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004): 202.

generation's continuous aesthetic regression to the past, and the traces of the present in representations of the past. The theoretical text that allowed me to shape my focus of research was Mark Fisher's *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Fisher theorizes our current generation is haunted by futures that have failed to come to fruition. For Fisher, hauntology is "exercised by the problem of memory and its imperfect recovery,"[12] which begins to describe this style that employs certain strategies of exhumation—the unearthing of visuals, sounds, technologies, and modes of production now considered retro, outdated, and obsolete. My thesis focuses on the hauntological aesthetic within a performance space, specifically music videos that simulate televisual form and failure. For televisual analysis, scholars such as Neil Postman, George Lipsitz, Dominik Schrey and Jonathan Rozenkrantz have written extensively on the role of television programs and its familiar aesthetics in postmodern, post-capitalist society. Their writings on the televisual subjects and technologies have been crucial to my research on television and its artifacts.

Scholars such as Fisher, Rozenkrantz and Schrey have contributed to tele-technological scholarship using Freud's theory of the uncanny, which is strongly related to Derrida's hauntology, and overall, the recorded-sound-image. Retrospective art addresses the pastiche-time of postmodernity and the spectral-time of recorded mediums and recording technologies—the recorded-sound-image— "the conception of self and temporality that recording creates."[13] These theories circle back to my subjects of interest within hip-hop studies, addressing the concerns of race through technoculture of the twentieth century. Additionally, essays such as Richard Pope's

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[12] Mark Fisher, "The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (2013): 45.

[13] Claire M. Holdsworth, "Hauntologies: The Ghost, Voice and the Gallery," *Vertigo* (April 2013), Accessed 23 January 2018, https://www.carrollfletcher.com/usr/library/documents/john-akomfrah-press/claire-m.-holdsworth-hauntologies-the-ghost-voice-and-the-gallery-close-up-april-2013.pdf

"Hooked on Affect: Detroit Techno and Dystopian Digital Culture", Nabeel Zuberi's "Is This the Future? Black Music and Technology Discourse," and Matthew Causey's "The Screen Test of the Double" have introduced concepts of the uncanny in recorded images and further supported my research of Detroit as a spatio-temporal subject.

Methodology

In my analysis of "Ain't It Funny" and "When It Rain," I create an integrated critical theoretical approach with deconstructive studies as described by French theorist Jacques Derrida in his 1993 book, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* and interpreted by contemporary British theorist Mark Fisher in *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* and *The Weird and the Eerie*. Brown's audiovisual content depicts retroactive televisual imagery but pushes their implications further beyond nostalgic desire and into a surreal reimagined technologized space where the boundaries between past and present are obfuscated.

In the postmodern climate of resurrecting content of our past, we also unearth hidden contexts that continue to haunt in collapsed time. The spectral elements that shape and define our conventionalized ideologies in late capitalism, like ghosts, exist in paradox to the traditional notion of *being*—thus, they have a "hauntology." The concept of hauntology was first coined by Derrida in the early 1990s. Derrida's text challenged Francis Fukuyama's argument in *The End of History and the Last Man,* which claimed Karl Marx's theories had been fully defeated as the Berlin Wall fell.[14] Derrida proposed that Marx's ideas would continue to haunt history, just as Marx described the "specter of communism" was haunting Europe at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto.* Marx's text is used alongside Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in shaping Derrida's

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[14] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life,* 34.

demonstration of how the nature of ghosts parallels the spectral nature of capitalism and communism. The word "hauntology" is a pun on the word "ontology"—in Derrida's native French tongue, these two words become a homophone—and the concept is used by Derrida to question the fundamental assumptions of "what is it to Be"[15] claiming, "learning to live— [if it] remains to be done, it can only happen between life and death. Neither in life nor in death alone."[16] As such, Derrida explains "to be" is to "live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship […] of ghosts. […] And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations."[17] Derrida, therefore, presents hauntology as a synonymic alternative to ontology, expanding on the articulation of being so that it may consider the spectral affect of both presence and absence.

In the spirit of the general methodology of deconstruction that he established, Derrida's text is an attempt to destabilize knowledge: the foundation of our culture is deeply influenced by a delusive exchange-value system, and it is continuously haunted by ideological ghosts which represent prophesies of possible futures. These ghosts, and the way that they haunt us, become symbolic of the purpose of deconstruction—they are intent on disrupting reality in order to expand meaning as suddenly and aggressively as possible. Derrida's ghosts are used to subvert the ideals of capitalism and history and to undermine the dualisms that construct our foundations of meaning. Derrida's concept of hauntology begs us to question the following: how does the spectral manifest? For Brown, what are these ghosts from his past trying to tell him?

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[15] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 2.
[16] Ibid., xvii.
[17] Ibid., xviii.

Contemporary media theorists such as Mark Fisher, Simon Reynolds, Alessio Kolioulis, Martin Jay and Grafton Tanner have adapted Derrida's concept of hauntology to comment on music, visual culture and race. For this thesis, I focus mainly on Mark Fisher's contributions to Derrida's hauntology, as two of his theoretical texts have largely shaped my research: *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*[18] and *The Weird and the Eerie*.[19] Fisher theorizes our current generation is haunted by futures that have failed to come to fruition. For Fisher, hauntology is "exercised by the problem of memory and its imperfect recovery,"[20] which begins to describe this postmodern style that employs certain strategies of exhumation— the unearthing of visuals, sounds, technologies, and modes of production now considered retro, outdated, and obsolete. Prior generations who have witnessed changes to popular culture throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s allowed them to learn how to measure the passage of cultural time; however, whatever expectations that were formed in an earlier era seem more likely to be startled by the outright persistence of familiar and recognizable forms today. Expanding on Franco Berardi's idea that we are experiencing the "slow cancellation of the future," Fisher argues that the twenty-first century fails to achieve any sense of newness, only a deflation of cultural expectations that were fabricated by the modern period and shaped by conceptual frameworks from shifting developments and ideologies. Fisher elaborates:

> It is not that nothing happened in the period when the slow cancellation of the future set in. On the contrary, those 30 years have been a time of massive, traumatic change. In the UK, the election of Margaret Thatcher had brought to an end the uneasy compromises of the so-called postwar social consensus. Thatcher's neoliberal programme in politics was reinforced by a transnational restructuring of the capitalist economy. The shift into so-called Post-Fordism—with globalisation, ubiquitous computerisation and

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[18] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Alresford Hants: Zero Books, 2014).
[19] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016).
[20] Mark Fisher, "The Metaphysics of Crackle," 45.

the casualisation of labour—resulted in a complete transformation in the way that work and leisure are organized. In the last 10-15 years, meanwhile, the internet and mobile telecommunications technology have altered the texture of everyday experiences beyond all recognition. Yet, perhaps *because* of all this, there's an increasing sense that culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present. Or it could be that, in one very important sense, there is no present to grasp and articulate anymore.[21]

This temporal crisis exists in tandem with American culture in late capitalism, and in recycling past cultural artifacts, we risk promoting their exploitative ideologies that lie beneath their surface, further repeating the past. As Brown's music videos reveal, such technological artifacts as the television once gave American viewers confidence to keep up with the rapidly changing times—a key to the future. Now it is considered a key to the past. By placing his own self into simulated televisual spaces of the past, Brown is able to speculate different meanings in the present by uncovering and exposing the contradictions that the smooth operation of our larger ideological system actively tries to repress. Through my analysis, hauntology is extended beyond the conceptual assumptions of our foundational perspectives through the surreal reimagining of televisual technology and culture. The television itself becomes a hauntological apparatus in the way its space produces temporal ambiguity and cultural historicism. By producing modes of Freud's concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), Brown's videos reveal the tele-technological recorded-time-images of our past to be simultaneously haunted and haunting.

Inadvertently, my interdisciplinary research ruminates on the similarities in the imbricated lives of Derrida, Fisher and Brown. There are the obvious connections such as the influence of Derrida's theory in Fisher's writing and the parallel careers of Fisher and Brown, which roughly began just a few years prior to Derrida's death in 2004. All three gained a unique standing in their field(s) in their own right and, I believe it is important to note, their vantage

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[21] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 8-9.

points are those of perennial outsiders. For Derrida and Brown, their exclusion from society involved their race,[22] and further, all three men have been open with their struggles with depression,[23] and their lower-class status. These lifetimes spent navigating identity through spectral experiences and acts of exclusion and exhaust are key to understanding how my thesis analyzes Danny Brown's audiovisual content through the concept of hauntology, as derived from the deconstructive strategy. Brown's work continuously demonstrates a complex hybridity of perspective, and routinely plays on cultural codes in order to critique dominant cultural hegemony and how it uses its power to warp the experience of reality itself. Through the tampering of time and technology, concepts like identity and history become more riddled by paradox, resurrecting a new bizarre world over and over again.

Thesis Chapters

In the following chapters, I analyze two music videos by Brown: "Ain't It Funny" and "When It Rain." Chapter Two begins this analysis with an overview of Danny Brown and his position in the twenty-first century's cultural landscape of hip-hop. This overview includes a brief discussion of popular hip-hop culture and its visual representations under capitalism. I intend to focus on the shift from hip-hop's "gangsta rap" era from the late 1990s and early 2000s to the present, when rap music has returned its focus to independent artistry and experimentation. I conclude with an analysis of Brown's audiovisual content from his recent 2016 album *Atrocity Exhibition* and its connection to Derrida's concept of hauntology as adapted by Mark Fisher.

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[22] Derrida, a Sephardic Jew raised in colonial Algeria, wrote in 1976: "No trauma, for me, perhaps, which is not linked on some level with the experience of racism and/or anti-Semitism."

[23] Sadly, Mark Fisher took his own life in the beginning of 2017, just before the release of *The Weird and the Eerie.*

Here, I will further explain hauntology's fitting application in the critical discussion of retroactive aesthetics and artifacts in Brown's audiovisual content.

Chapter Three is an examination of Brown's collaborative music video release for his song "Ain't It Funny," released in early 2017. This chapter explores the music video's use of dated televisual aesthetics and artifacts and examines how Brown is commenting on television's historical impact on past and present popular culture and representation. To conduct this analysis, I focus on the video's parodic depiction of a late 1980s / early 1990s television family sitcom episode. I first examine the connection between representational imagery on television and Brown's strategies in subverting images that are deeply embedded within personal and cultural memory. Then I analyze television's role in legitimizing dominant cultural ideologies and racial politics during the late twentieth century—specifically through programs of the traditional family sitcom structure and their relation to the new conservativism in social, economic, and political culture under the prevailing neoliberal policies beginning in the 1980s—and how popular television shows such as these created foundational visual representations of the American family and their home. Chapter Three concludes with an analysis of Brown's aesthetic use of hauntology and its achieved effect of developing Freud's notions of the uncanny; this conceptual framework elevates Brown's parody to a critical meditation on race and representation in the televisual archive. By retroactively placing himself in a simulated televisual past and disrupting the viewer's expectations, I argue that Brown is reframing myths about his own identity in a critical manner and encouraging the viewer to look towards the past to investigate popular media's role in informing cultural knowledge.

Chapter Four analyzes Brown's music video for the first single release from *Atrocity Exhibition*, titled "When It Rain." Here, I examine the representation of home through Brown's

depiction of his west side Detroit neighborhood and its localized hip-hop culture. Brown's use of DIY aesthetics through simulated televisual remanence frames a digital medium as a historical document, obfuscating its temporality within a hauntological framework. To conduct this analysis, I explore the implications of post-capitalism through the video's DIY low-resolution aesthetic and Brown's lyrical content. I begin this chapter by performing a succinct twentieth century overview of the city of Detroit and the implications of its decline, but with emphasis on the impact of racial politics and 1980s neoliberal ideologies on the city's narratives throughout popular media since. I then analyze Brown's audiovisual content as his submission to the cultural narrative of Detroit. Once more, as Brown oscillates in between past and present on a televisual landscape, and by enabling independent localized practice, Brown's representation of his home challenges the conventional imagery of popular media. Brown summons the televisual past to reframe myths surrounding the identity of his place, encouraging viewers to look towards the past in order to create a new future in the present—so that our present can reveal a new interpretation of history to inform cultural knowledge.

CHAPTER TWO:

DANNY BROWN

Admittedly, I did not listen to much contemporary rap music before hearing Danny Brown for the first time roughly back in 2011. Music culture until that time seemed stagnant since the turn of the century, especially hip-hop, which was in the midst of a commercial boom, and I avoided the majority of new releases by artists considered mainstream. It is worth mentioning how, at the turn of the Millennium, not only were CDs expensive, but high-speed internet was not yet fully available to my peers or me; new music, it seemed, was still hard to find outside of the commercial frame of the American music industry. This industry alone yielded immense power, and it circulated images of material excess, wealth and fame through music videos and "reality" television. Any excitement and energy that subcultural forces expressed were still quickly corrupted or co-opted into commercial value. Whatever meaningful revelations could have been found in a desolate wasteland of a cultural era, they would still have been overshadowed by the outbreak of the global financial crisis and its subsequent recession— the definitive events in my generation's coming-of-age story.

Brown, along with similar artists, sprang forth from this era of discontent seemingly as a response to the stale culture. Independent music releases, in the form of digital mixtapes, became a powerful source of the new that also resisted commercial and corporate influence. Brown's art was raw, unapologetic, absolutely weird and most of all, he was *funny*—whatever mold rap artists had to submit to during this era, Brown acknowledged it and yet still deviated from it.[24]

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[24] I must note, upon familiarizing myself with Brown's music for the first time, it was a relief to hear references to drinking cheap beer. Much of mainstream hip-hop party culture by the early-2000s had become so deeply occupied with displays of excess and wealth that expensive champagne seemed to be a feature in every major music video from the genre. Relatability here is key: never in my life would I so much as taste Cristal—let alone be

Hailing from the Dexter-Linwood neighborhood of west side Detroit, Brown (born Daniel Dewan Sewell, March 16, 1981) is undeniably an anomalous figure in rap music. Utilizing a hybrid vocal style that varies between low tonalities and manic, high pitched snarls, Brown balances party music with themes surrounding his experiences of living in one of the most depressed areas of Detroit, often shedding light on the desperate circumstances that continue to haunt himself and his community, such as poverty and drug abuse. Since his debut album *Hybrid* (2010), Brown has developed an audiovisual aesthetic that continuously demonstrates "modalities of attachments to the past"[25] by integrating old media into new media and meditating on the relationship between the two, and subsequently, his own personal relationship with these mediums from his own past. Later albums such as *XXX* (2011),[26] *Old* (2013) and *Atrocity Exhibition* (2016) continued to shape the aesthetic towards abstraction, experimentation and subversion in visual, lyrical and sonic content. This paper seeks to analyze contemporary thinking about identity, memory and its representations through Brown's two singles and respective music video releases from *Atrocity Exhibition*: "Ain't It Funny" and "When It Rain." These artifacts explore historically embedded televisual images that recur throughout popular media, obfuscating the boundaries that separate past and present and envisioning a surreal new world.

   Danny Brown illustrates hip-hop's transition to include a new index of digital technologies, pivoting away from the modern, "gangsta rap" period that dominated the scene for nearly two decades prior. What sets this earlier era (c. 1980-2000) apart from today's rap music

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able to afford it. Most nights, my social group was limited to cases of PBR and Stroh's, which were being reintroduced to the market as "retro" brands.

  [25] Nabeel Zuberi, "Is This the Future? Black Music and Technology Discourse," *Science Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2 (2007): 285.

  [26] In 2016 this album placed third on *Pitchforks'* "50 Best Rap Mixtapes of the Millennium" list. *Pitchfork*, 29 June 2016, Accessed 10 February 2018, https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/9908-the-50-best-rap-mixtapes-of-the-millennium/

is its commodified posturing and glorification of gang lifestyle. In *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement*, S. Craig Watkins writes: "In exchange for global celebrity, pop prestige, and cultural influence hip-hop's top performers had to immerse themselves into a world of urban villainy that by the new millennium had lost sight of the line between pop life and real life."[27] Acts such as N.W.A., Ice-T, Snoop Dogg, Jay-Z, DMX, and 50 Cent[28] created and maintained identities that glorified ghetto life in order to benefit from the subsequent commercialization of their constructed personas. The expansion of rap artists' reach to unprecedented heights became contradicted by its simultaneous struggle for survival. Watkins notes this contradiction as "one of the cruelest ironies in the rise and transformation of hip-hop," noting, "the fact that its livelihood—indeed its very survival as a pop culture juggernaut—rested almost entirely on its ability to sell Black death. The embrace of guns, gangsterism, and ghetto authenticity brought an aura of celebrity and glamour to the grim yet fabulously hyped portraits of ghetto life. From the gangsta-inflicted anthems of the 1990s to the "thugged-out" caricatures of the new millennium, hip-hop or, more precisely, corporate hip-hop, played its role with chilling precision."[29] Indeed, "gangsta rap" exaggerated the discourse of white panic that has historically stated Black men were violent and dangerous and while these artists achieved success and fame in the corporate music industry, it came at a price: the promotion of transgressive ideology as well as its potentially dangerous implications.

Under the commercial appeal of these artists, the hip-hop ethos of "keeping it real" spiraled into dark and absurd games of one-upmanship as artists replicated forms of tough-guy

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[27] S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters: Politics, Pop Culture, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005): 2.

[28] Niggaz Wit Attitudes: O'Shea Jackson Sr. (Ice Cube), Eric Lynn Wright (Eazy E), Andre Romelle Young (Dr. Dre); Tracy Lauren Marrow (Ice-T), Calvin Cordozar Broadus, Jr. (Snoop Dogg), Shawn Corey Carter (Jay-Z), Earl Simmons (DMX), and Curtis James Jackson III (50 Cent).

[29] S. Craig Watkins, *Hip Hop Matters,* 2-3.

gangbanger stereotypes that became more violent and misogynistic by the beginning of the new

Millennium. These artists and their images were no longer realistic representations of the Black

urban experience but caricatures of commercial industry success. The culmination of this

commercial gangsta image can be seen through the rapid rise to success of Queens-born rapper

50 Cent (Curtis James Jackson III, b. 1975) and his 2003 release *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*[30] which

initially boasted the mythological status of his street image through a bizarre selling point which

informed consumers that this man had been shot nine times at close range and survived.[31]

    The true narrative of "the streets" and the Black men who inhabit these spaces would not

fit the depiction of the corporate-circulated image of Black men in the imagination of white

America—these identities contradict each other. In response to the release of *Get Rich or Die*

Tryin', Ta-Nehisi Coates summarized this dissonance as such:

> White America has always had a perverse fascination with the idea
> of black males as violent and sexually insatiable animals. A prime
> source of racism's emotional energy was an obsession with
> protecting white women from black brutes. Since the days of *Birth*
> *of a Nation* up through *Native Son* and now with gangsta rap,
> whites have always been loyal patrons of such imagery, drawn to
> the visceral fear factor and antisocial fantasies generated by black
> men. Less appreciated is the extent to which African Americans
> have bought into this idea. At least since the era of blaxploitation,
> the African American male has taken pride in his depiction as the
> quintessential man in the black hat. It is a desperate gambit by a
> group deprived of real power—even on our worst days, we can still
> scare the shit of white suburbanites.[32]

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[30] This album was released by Eminem's label, Shady Records. 8.1 million copies have been sold. Erik Ross, "The 50 Best Selling Rap Albums of All Time," *Complex,* 18 May 2013, Accessed 10 February 2018, https://www.complex.com/music/2013/05/the-50-best-selling-rap-albums/run-dmc-raising-hell

[31] The shooting happened three years prior in 2000 with Curtis James Jackson III sustaining gunshot wounds to the hand, arm, hip, both legs, chest, and left cheek. The bullet shrapnel lodged in his jaw would result in slurred speech, providing his signature flow as a rap artist. Sidney Madden, "Today in Hip-Hop: 50 Cent Gets Shot Nine Times," *XXL*, 24 May 2016, Accessed 10 February 2018, http://www.xxlmag.com/news/2016/05/today-in-hip-hop-50-cent-gets-shot-nine-times/

[32] Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Keepin' It Unreal," *The Village Voice,* 3 June 2003, Accessed 29 March 2018, https://www.villagevoice.com/2003/06/03/keepin-it-unreal/

By the late 2000s, the gangsta rap image started to implode on itself. Eminem went to rehab, DMX went to prison, Nelly and Ludacris went to Hollywood, Lil' Jon became a joke, [33] and the rest turned to pop music.[34] *Popmatters* columnist Andrew Doscas theorizes that this dramatic shift in rap music signaled the end of the era of gangsta rap; he pinpoints its final days to an album sales showdown in 2007 between 50 Cent's[35] *Curtis* and Kanye West's *Graduation*. Similarly, Rosie Swash wrote for *The Guardian*: "The pitting of 50 Cent against Kanye West, when both released albums on the same day in September 2007, highlighted the diverging facets of hip-hop in the last decade; the former was gangsta rap for the noughties, while West was the thinking man's alternative."[36] The commercial and critical success of *Graduation* not only crowned West as a leader of hip-hop's postmodern movement, but it proved artists and audiences alike were ready to challenge the commercialized homogenization of rap music.

Following Kanye West's success, Danny Brown and similar, emerging rap artists such as Lupe Fiasco, Kid Cudi, Tyler the Creator, Frank Ocean, Nicki Minaj, Kendrick Lamar, Chance the Rapper, El-P, Action Bronson, Childish Gambino, MF DOOM, and Mr. Muthafuckin eXquire[37] led a foray into this new era of hip-hop culture, shedding the formulaic personas and

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[33] Marshall Bruce Mathers III (Eminem), Cornell Iral Haynes Jr. (Nelly), Christopher Brian Bridges, (Ludacris), Jonathan Smith (Lil' Jon).

[34] Andrew Doscas, "The Future Is Now, and It Is Odd: A Retrospective on Hip-hop in the '00s," *Popmatters,* last modified 23 September 2014, accessed 10 February 2018, https://www.popmatters.com/184327-the-future-is-now-and-it-is-odd-2495633036.html

[35] Coincidentally, after a collaboration in 2010 with a member of 50 Cent's hip hop group, G-Unit, it was rumored that Danny Brown would be signed to 50 Cent's G-Unit Records and indoctrinated into the group. However, Brown claims his fashion choices, such as his affinity for slim fit jeans and other hipster attire, ultimately clashed with G-Unit's image: "It was a real thing. 50 was with it; he just didn't sign me because of my jeans. He liked the music, but he didn't like the way I looked," Brown told MTV. "I understand where they were coming from with that, but you gotta understand where I'm coming from too: I'm from Detroit." Rob Markman, "Danny Brown Admits Drug Habit, Failed G-Unit Deal," *MTV* 6 Aug 2011, Accessed 10 February 2018, http://www.mtv.com/news/1669170/danny-brown-xxx-mixtape/

[36] Rosie Swash, "Kanye v 50 Cent," *The Guardian,* 12 June 2011, accessed 18 February 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jun/13/kanye-vs-50-cent

[37] Wasalu Muhammed Jaco, Scott Ramon Seguro Mescudi, Tyler Gregory Okonma, Christopher Edwin Breaux, Onika Tanya Maraj, Kendrick Lamar Duckworth, Chancelor Jonathan Bennett, Jaime Meline, Ariyan Arslani, Donald McKinley Glover, Daniel Dumile, and Hugh Anthony Allison, respectively.

stereotypes that stifled the rap music scene for decades, opting instead to tap back into its

potential for experimentation and exploration. In 2014, *Harvard Political Review*'s Music Issue

pointed out that of the 75 rap albums that topped Billboard Rap charts in the past four years,

"nearly 15 percent were produced by artists considered outside the mainstream."[38] Authenticity

was no longer decided by the braggadocio that had defined artists in the past—introspection and

intimacy increasingly began to define realness once more.

For a genre that traditionally valued total invincibility, the turn to vulnerability in hip-hop

seemed like a surprising shift in culture. Danny Brown, however, has viewed this turn as a part

of a natural evolution:

> People weren't being themselves for so long. You had rappers
> pretendin' to be gangstas and, y'know, they weren't really
> gangstas. People used to just go along with whatever the big trend
> was at the time, but with hip-hop being so vast now and there
> being so many outlets for it—thanks to the internet—it's easier for
> rappers to just be themselves, because the people who'll relate to
> their particular take on rap can find them now. And not everyone
> can relate to being a gangsta.[39]

Before *Atrocity Exhibition*, Danny Brown's unconventional image and sound projected an

erratic, even volatile persona, something akin to a PBR-guzzling cartoonish trickster that lives on

Adderall and ecstasy pills. Half Detroit hustler, half comical party animal, Brown was a playful

disruption to a genre in flux. His albums broadened his appeal beyond the stifling expectations of

the hip-hop world and transformed his art into one that crosses genres and collapses boundaries

in between worlds:

> It's still all organic to me. It's just my life. There's been too much
> in hip-hop where you're supposed to be this certain way, you know

[38] Clara McNulty-Finn, "The Evolution of Rap," *Beat of the Drum: The Music Issue Harvard Political Review* (April 10, 2014), Accessed 12 February 2018, http://harvardpolitics.com/covers/evolution-rap/

[39] Joe Madden, "How Danny Brown Called Time on Pill Popping and Returned with an Extraordinary New Album" *New Musical Express*, 30 September 2017, Accessed 29 March 2018, https://www.nme.com/features/danny-brown-on-new-album-atrocity-exhibiton-757419

what I'm saying? I can't carry a gun and smoke weed and listen to
Vampire Weekend? Like, c'mon.[40]

It is indeed Brown's individuality—his Detroit-bred grime and punk style, frenzied vocal flows and nasal Midwestern tonalities, and its smirking delivery through his signature wit—that made him into the oddball idiosyncratic cult-hero he is known as in the present. *Atrocity Exhibition* is Brown's post-mania masterpiece: a reflection on the self-made, self-indulgent, and self-destructive practices Brown has entertained throughout his upbringing and career. It is not only Brown's most serious album, but critically praised as one of the more musically intrepid rap albums of the new Millennium. As the title of the album suggests, its mood is as surreal and dark as any Joy Division[41] release, or more accurately, the J.G. Ballard novel by the same title: depression, drugs, sex and death are looming subjects explored amongst a territory of ominous sound—beats ripped from moody post-punk bass to stripped-down skeletal 1970s futuristic psychedelia and heavily warped 1980s synths dominate throughout. *Atrocity Exhibition* was also Brown's first album released through Warp Records, a unique pick for the esteemed British electronic music staple which included London producer Paul White to establish the weird and eerie sound-bed for Brown to lay his tracks.

But in fact, the significance of London grime and electronic music in the creation of Danny Brown's catalog goes beyond its place in the present, reaching back towards a time in the recent past. Visually and sonically, London's electronic music history shares a deep parallel with that of Detroit—its eerie beats, gloomy demeanor and raw distortion speak of both cities as

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[40] Ryan Leas, "You Ain't Heard It Like This Before: Danny Brown as Visionary Rap Star," *Stereogum*, 28 September 2017, Accessed 10 October 2018, https://www.stereogum.com/featured/you-aint-heard-it-like-this-before/

[41] Joy Division was a gloomy post-punk English rock band that were active from 1976-1980. Their song "Atrocity Exhibition" from the 1979 album *Unknown Pleasures*, was named after Ballard's novel. Brown has cited both references as inspiration for naming his album.

industrial powerhouses-turned-wastelands at the hand of post-Fordist neoliberal policies. Brown

has repeatedly cited London's electronic music scene as inspiration, not only for his own music

but for Detroit hip-hop overall. The similar urban environments of London and Detroit later

during the twentieth-century, especially in the parallel emergence of Reaganomics in the U.S.

and Thatcherism in the U.K., found ways to manifest themselves in their music production. His

2013 album release *Old* realigned Brown with his influences as experienced through Detroit, as

described during an interview:

> I'm letting all these people know where I came from before I
> continue on; it has that Detroit, J Dilla, hip-hop vibe, and then it
> has the electronic, grime, ghettotech vibe. That shit doesn't come
> together, but that's who I am. […] I really respected grime as a
> culture; every sound reflects a city, and that's the sound that
> reflects what you guys [in London] are about. London reminds me
> of Detroit in so many ways.[42]

The similarities in London's grime and electronic music culture and Brown's style embody the

hauntological aesthetic of temporal disjunction, retrofuturism and nostalgia that Mark Fisher

defined. Although hauntology has rarely been used to describe music culture aesthetics outside

of the UK, Brown's psychological connection to the concept's location is necessary in arguing

that Brown should be considered a hauntological artist. The American counterpart to

hauntological music, *hypnagogic pop,*[43] developed with similar sentiment to hauntology's U.K.

aesthetic movement in music, but ultimately, lacked the critical foregrounding to adequately

confront formal nostalgia through displacement.

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[42] Ben Beaumont-Thomas, "Danny Brown: A Hip-hop Jekyll and Hyde," *The Guardian,* 27 September 2013, Accessed 20 March 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/sep/27/danny-brown-old

[43] Coined in 2009 David Keenan. Talia Soghomonian, "How Bands are Sleepwalking Through the 80s," *New Musical Express*, 4 April 2010, Accessed 10 September 2018, https://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/how-bands-are-sleepwalking-through-the-80s-774482

Brown's appropriation of a hauntological aesthetic extends from sampled musical artifacts into contexts for actionality. Hip-hop aesthetics have always practiced "close" listening and transforming it into an act of performative possession. Cultural theorist Andrew Bartlett describes digital sampling in African American hip-hop as "intricately connected to an African American/African diaspora aesthetic which carefully selects available media, texts, and contexts for performative use,"[44] and further argues that these artists and the "oral pedagogical techniques [they] utilize" maintain capabilities that reveal what W.E.B. Du Bois's called "second sight"— who, in 1903, claimed an African American is:

> . . . gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[45]

Essentially, second sight is the ideological activity where the "'minority' knows the majority not only better than the obverse, but often better than the 'majority' knows itself"[46]—Black Americans see themselves inwardly as they do through the sight of the obverse, and are forced to navigate the white Western world as a paradox: they seek acceptance into the dominant society, but are cast back in their desire to maintain their identity. Black cultural expression in the postmodern era, such as hip-hop, has been defined by scholar Nelson George as "post-Soul."

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[44] Andrew Bartlett, "Airshafts, Loudspeakers, and the Hip Hop Sample: Contexts and African American Music Aesthetics," *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader,* eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2004): 393.

[45] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* The Project Gutenberg ebook, 29 January 2008, Accessed 10 September 2018, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm

[46] Andrew Bartlett, "Airshafts, Loudspeakers, and the Hip Hop Sample," 393.

Elaborating on these ideas, Greg Tate reiterates how traditional Soul culture was constructed "around the verities of working-class African-American life" under segregation; post-Soul's "signature was not its smooth Blackness but its self-conscious hybridity of Black and white cultural signifiers."[47] The way in which Black hip-hop artists sample, manipulate, extract, and reproduce the historical archive and elaborate through performance of opposing perceptions reveals a metaphysical space of simultaneous free play and fracture, where the past is used to both define, and become erased by, the present. By involving the past without deferring to its structures and limitations, sampling allows an empowering speculation on a massive spectrum of cultural referents to be communicated and actualized. Du Bois continues:

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—
> this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double
> self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of
> the older selves to be lost.[48]

Thus, the way these artists engage with their "double consciousness," as Du Bois described, is a unique, hybrid vantage point that allows them to intervene on the world historical stage and renegotiate with relationships of control as empowered subjects. This dismantling and defamiliarizing of the dominant conceptions held about history and identity in order to generate new modalities of communication correlates to Jacques Derrida's hauntology.

Intertextuality, collage, and sampling are essential tools in constructing a hauntology, forgoing conventional structure and linearity for abstraction and obfuscation that characterizes the processes of an object's existence. Using technology as the conjuring medium, sampling becomes a performance of pastiche in hip-hop's construction of hybrid identities—that is to say, while Brown is commenting on fragments of his own identity and memory, he is simultaneously

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[47] Greg Tate, "Nigs R Us, or How Blackfolk Became Fetish Objects" in *Everything But the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture* (New York: Broadway Books, 2003): 6.
[48] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*.

presenting text in which the implications of the media can be read from a historical period from which it was produced (the familiar) and the sampled text (the strange). Music scholar Brett Lashua claims that hybrid identities "make and re-make culture through appropriating the cultural 'raw materials' of life in order to construct meaning in their own specific cultural localities. […] they are 'sampling' from broader popular culture and reworking what they can take into their own specific local cultures."[49] The intertextual shaping of these aural and visual artifacts is specific to his own identity and memory, and his examining of multiple facets of his identity and memory through various symbols and meanings of popular culture's past becomes a radical interpretation of meaning in the present.

Brown's non-linear, intertextual narratives and subversive recoding of traditional signs in "Ain't It Funny" and "When It Rain" explore paradoxes in temporal and communicative modes through multiple facets of the Other. By sampling aesthetics of historical televisual images, he uses technology as a medium in which the simultaneous possession and dispossession of the sample's origin can be articulated. The polysemic capacity of Brown's aural and visual articulation within the tele-technological recorded format grants it the spectrality of a technologized time and exposes the media archive's function of informing our conceptions of knowledge. It is here that hauntology builds a metaphorical space of infinite speculative expression in regard to the identity of the Black male living in white America. Through Derrida's method of hauntology, these expressions reveal notions of the weird and eerie from our everyday lives.

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[49] Brett Lashua, "The Arts of the Remix: Ethnography and Rap," *Anthropology Matters* 8, no. 2 (2006), Accessed 20 February 2018, https://www.anthropologymatters.com/index.php/anth_matters/article/view/67/129

CHAPTER 3:

"Ain't It Funny"

Jacques Derrida's hauntological theories have been adapted by contemporary theorists and scholars to address the aesthetic trends of the last decade as marked by the ethos of being haunted, however being haunted does not necessarily require a specific spectral figure. It is possible to be haunted by memories, guilt, loss, fear, failure or what has been stolen from us. Frederic Jameson describes Derrida's ghosts as "moments in which the present—and above all our current present, the wealthy, sunny, gleaming world of the postmodern and the end of history, of the new world of postmodern and the end of capitalism—unexpectedly betrays us."[50] For Mark Fisher, the idea of nostalgia as a disruption of time is an essential element of hauntological aesthetics. Throughout *Specters of Marx*, Derrida echoes a line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "the time is out of joint," and further claims "the spectral rumor now resonates, it invades everything: the spirit of the 'sublime' and the spirit of 'nostalgia' cross all borders."[51] Thus, the disjointed time, or the disruption in time that nostalgia creates, is what allows the past to become capable of haunting the present. This haunting does not manifest through the simple repetition of forms from the past, but instead as a return of the ideas, images, and ideals from the past that, against the backdrop of the present, reveal themselves to be false.

The hauntological trend in aesthetics of the recent decade is therefore steeped in the idea that we have been dispossessed. Though Derrida's text made similar claims in relation to Marxism, and how it will haunt our rapidly-engulfing global economy under capitalism, hauntological aesthetics point towards the hauntings of our dispossessions. These aesthetics work

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[50] Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 39.
[51] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx,* 169.

to grieve the future that we lost, more accurately, remembers the future that was promised to us and never fulfilled. Without a distinct figuration of mourning, the hauntological is incomplete.

In Brown's music videos, the simulation of technologies such as television perpetuates a continual merging of the past and present, creating a time out of joint. In fact, the word "television" comes from the Greek word *tele-,* meaning "far away", and Latin's *visio*, or "seeing,"[52] further directing towards the material of memory by encapsulating a view of the past. Televisual aesthetics and popular tropes found in familiar programs of our past, in addition to their nostalgic-driven use found in the present, collapses the distance between what we used to think and what we currently think, because this televisual "reality" fails to extend itself beyond the past. Not only does our past haunt the present, but our present, as it is tasked with the mediation of history, continuously haunts the past. Thus, Brown's central presence in the following analysis of these two music videos, I argue, is simultaneously haunted and haunting.

"Ain't it Funny"

The second track from the 2016 album *Atrocity Exhibition*, "Ain't It Funny," features clanging synth noise and a diving saxophone-heavy sample of which is initially a vague throwback to the past. The lyrics allude to the dark reality of drug use: using drugs as a way to gain control, only to eventually succumb to the drug's control. The suitably deranged and surreal music video, directed by Hollywood comic actor Jonah Hill, unfolds as a dark satire: Brown is trapped in a quintessential late 1980s/early 1990s family sitcom and cast as the "crazy uncle" within a white, suburban-dwelling, middle-class, patriarchal family structure (Fig. 1). The expectation of traditional family sitcom tropes exists in contrast to its violent dispossession in

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[52] Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000): 4.

our present. For "Ain't It Funny", a technologized time is used to unravel the linear model.

Brown's single, as with any of its genre within hip-hop, "depended on the turntable and the

mixer, which converted pre-recorded material from an inert museum into an infinite archive, ripe

for recombination."[53] The droning saxophone in "Ain't It Funny" directs us back to the 1980s

again, specifically as a sample from "Wervin,'" a track from the 1981 album *Nick Mason's*

Fictitious Sports. Overall, anyone not familiar with the side project of Pink Floyd's drummer

would still likely place this sample within the era of the 1980s. The saxophone itself was an

instrument that rose with jazz-related genres, however, as it was nearing the late 1980s, its sound

succumbed to clichéd use within the era's pop/rock arena. The saxophone trend sizzled out its

last days on the billboard charts and eventually became "a punchline in a joke about the 80s."[54]

The glitching and distorted television reception as a visual layer of "Ain't It Funny" operates in a

similar way. Its fuzzy aesthetic (Fig. 2) and technological glitching (Fig. 3) within digital

formatting points back in time by "deconstructing the old, or the lo-fi, by showing a failure

through the hi-fi."[55] Hauntological aesthetics continue to exercise their capabilities to be

haunting, but also, they mock us, accuse us, and remind us that *everything we know* is delicately

contingent and circumstantial. By addressing the familiar through memory and conceptual

frameworks that engaged with the popular televisual content of the past, "Ain't It Funny" begins

to reveal multiple facets of the strange that have always existed. Further, both characters and

audience are implicit in technology's facilitation of the strange (Fig. 4) (Fig. 5). With Brown on

both the creating and receiving ends of mounting anxiety, the aural and visual treatment of

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[53] Mark Fisher, "Metaphysics of Crackle," 477

[54] Kelsey McKinney, "Where Did All the Saxophones Go?" *The Outline*, 25 April 2017, Accessed 20 March 2018, https://theoutline.com/post/1409/saxophones-in-american-pop-music-history?zd=1&zi=tqto2zgh

[55] Yvette Grenata, "Hauntification, Aesthetics and Gentrified Toys in a Glass Globe (Or Making Glitch Art Out of Derrida Instead)," *Infinite Mile: Journal of Arts and Culture,* no. 18 (2015), Accessed 10 December 2017, http://infinitemiledetroit.com/Hauntification,_Aesthetics_and_Gentrified_Toys_in_a_Glass_Globe_(Or_Making_Gl itch_Art_Out_of_Derrida_Instead).html

"Ain't It Funny" builds an ever-shifting experience where Blackness can be understood through parody, pastiche, nostalgia, and the interrogation of memory. Brown employs modes of expression associated with Freud's notions of the uncanny—fictional doubles (Fig. 6) and aesthetic repetition (Fig. 7), (Fig. 8)—as a means to not only address the exploitative roles of Black identities within media culture of the past, but to question its implications in the present.

The music video is set up like an episode of a dated sitcom, starting with the broadcast network's title still. For "Ain't It Funny", a fuzzy card reading "Religious Values Network" fades into the opening shot of a clean, suburban home on a well-manicured lawn, establishing the basic setting for the plot to develop (Fig. 9). It is here that television sitcoms employ a short, introductory sketch just before the opening credits, called a "teaser," which usually introduces the protagonist and reveals an example of their personality, but often these are used for quick laughs to keep the audience watching. In the teaser for "Ain't It Funny", we are introduced to Danny Brown's character along with a female costar together in bed, lackadaisically smoking cigarettes and staring blankly past the camera. The young woman muses, "physical attention from older men makes me feel validated." A sitcom audience laugh-track replies "*Awwww…*" Clutching a bottle of malt liquor, Brown slurs, "I'm empty inside" to which the laugh-track repeats itself. A small boy walks in the bedroom, puts his hands on his hips and shakes his head at the sight before him. Flashing a toothy grin, the boy delivers his one-liner "Ohhh, Uncle Danny" and a supposed studio audience erupts with cheering.

Brown's wailing saxophone sample suddenly hits as the opening credits begin and the viewers find themselves on the other side of the front door, being introduced to the characters as they individually enter the home. Legendary indie-film director Gus Van Sant is introduced as Dad; former *Growing Pains* actor Joanna Kerns as Mom; social-media starlet Lauren Avery as

Daughter; "This Fucking Kid" as Kid, and Danny Brown as Uncle Danny. Together they convene on their living room sofa to complete the title image for the fictional sitcom *Ain't It Funny*. The "episode" continues with Uncle Danny and Daughter establishing that Uncle Danny has a drug abuse problem that is easily ignored by the other characters who themselves are watching a television show together. "I have a serious problem," (Fig. 10) he admits through captioned text, before pleading to a hysterical studio audience, "please stop laughing." The storyline quickly slips into a schizophrenic reordering of assumedly present and future events: a scene of Brown in bed with Mother and Daughter suddenly flashes to the same scene but Brown is covered in blood next to their lifeless bodies (Fig. 11), only to revert back to a prior scene (Fig. 12). The camera zooms in and out on Brown's mental breakdown happening throughout the studio home as he delivers the hook, "Ain't it funny how it happens? Ain't it?" (Fig. 13).

Brown's manic display becomes more sinister by the presence of two large puppet-like mascots in the form of a pill strip and a bottle of alcohol flanking each side of the bed (Fig. 14). I use the term mascot for its dual etymological meanings: originating from the late-nineteenth century's French *mascotte,* this term described a lucky charm or any object that brought luck to a household. Prior to this era; however, the term was a derivative of *masco*, meaning an object of sorcery or a spell.[56] Origins of the word "mascot" both bestow upon it a magical sense, as in, what was once inanimate has evolved to refer to a living thing. The mascot in late-twentieth century is mostly used as symbols for sports teams, but nonetheless, mascots now are exclusive to fictional representative identities for consumer brands and products. Brown's mascots represent the spectral being of drug use—under the disguise of being perceived as bearers of good fortune and happiness, these mascots gain a sense of physical being and become haunting

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[56] Pattilyn McLaughlin, "The Official Unofficial Mascot of Alfred University" (thesis, Alfred University, 2013), 8.

omens. They begin to follow Brown throughout the home, (Fig. 15) and as Brown tells them, "you guys are my only friends. I need you." The strip of pills replies with a warning: "We'll kill you and everyone you love" (Fig. 16). They eventually stab Brown in the abdomen and leave him to die.

Brown's sampling of the family sitcom is as intentional as it is personal. The metaphoric scenario of this music video has been embedded in the collective imagination—one that cannot remember their youth without mention of television programs. Undeniably, "Ain't It Funny" is a deranged collage of iconographic references from numerous sources in televisual culture, not limited to family sitcoms, but can be easily placed during Brown's childhood: the late 1980s/early 1990s era. Nearly every detail of the video not only alludes to this past era, but speaks to the same generation as Brown, whose childhoods were impacted by these symbols of family life. Everything from the studio home's layout and décor, the styles and mannerisms of the characters, the laugh-tracks and the television static, and even the mascot puppetry become recognizable symbols of television that have been embedded into our memories. The generic structure of "Ain't It Funny" as a family sitcom further reinforces the viewer's recognition of symbols they were exposed to in their upbringing, and equally, Brown's presence exposes those meanings as false.

Brown's own youth and upbringing has always been a prominent theme throughout his work, if not equally cut and connected through his own personal brand of perversions found within shock horror humor and explicit punchlines. His sense of humor is clearly present as he perverts his public image into a drug-addled psychotic Black rapper from Detroit who is inexplicably living with a perfect white family in the suburbs on an episode of a scripted

television sitcom being watched by an audience. Brown thus implicates the viewer in both the creation and destruction of his hybrid meta-identity.

Television

"Ain't It Funny" is a self-aware manifesto that combines and confuses Brown's public and private, past and present identities. In the music video, this interrogation of identity extends once more to the format of television where representations not only take visual form, but history and collective memory are represented through television's archival abilities. In *the Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs*, George Lipsitz explains that television programs evoke "the experiences of the past to lend legitimacy to the dominant ideologies of the present."[57] Since the television's entrance into the average American home by the late 1950s, it has become a powerful tool for capitalist persuasion. While television programs uphold their economic responsibilities as sources of profit and vehicles for advertisement, they also provide significant cultural functions, mainly, as a means of legitimizing the new economic and social relations surrounding its audience. Lipsitz argues that by examining television programs of our past, "we learn about both the world we have lost and the one we have yet to gain."[58] As history is continuously reshaped by the present, we are given endless opportunities to revisit the past through its available artifacts in order to reveal the construction and implication of its messages. By confronting their meanings and exposing their status as carefully constructed commodities, these images can be radically reinterpreted and used as a form of opposition for the present.

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[57] George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," *Cultural Anthropology* 1, no. 4 (November 1986): 356.
[58] Ibid., 383.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the television landscape was dominated by programs such as *Full House*, *Growing Pains*, *The Cosby Show*, *Married… with Children, Saved by the Bell, The Wonder Years*, *Family Ties*, and *Family Matters*. These programs presented American viewers of the 1980s and 1990s with nearly always "a half-hour of perfect, white, heteronormative families,"[59] and although most of these programs would deviate from this structure, they still reflected beliefs and practices that legitimized the prevailing ideologies threatened by emerging social relations. The family sitcom structure reflects an era of American life that embraced a new conservatism in social, economic, and political culture during the presidency of Ronald Reagan (served 1980-1988). Reagan's presidency propelled the rise of the "New Right": an assortment of white, affluent Americans that, in response to anxieties of the prior decade, were easily swayed by the self-interest and free-market principles Reagan endorsed. As modern capitalism took hold it demanded a certain consumer consciousness, one that German sociologist and theorist Jürgen Habermas of the Frankfurt School described as leaning towards "civil and familial-vocational privatism"—the behavior that values private consumer decisions over social responsibility.[60] Instead of the rooted independence that accompanied traditional family and community living, the emerging hyper-capitalist structure required a dependence on outside authorities—"advertisers, self-help experts, and psychiatric, educational, and political authorities."[61] The television would continue to play a crucial role in this legitimization by collapsing the distinction between family as part of a social network and family as a consumer unit—individual needs could now be met by purchasing a commodity. Its

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[59] Grafton Tanner, *Babbling Corpse: Vaporwave and the Commodification of Ghosts* (London: Zero Books, 2016): 26-7.

[60] Jürgen Habermas, *Ligitimation Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975): 71-75. Qtd in. George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory," 381.

[61] George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory," 381.

communication would nurture the consumer consciousness that sought validation from outside authorities, and further, it would assure that the characteristics of late capitalism—the impoverishment of work, family, and public life—"constitutes a legitimate and necessary part of progress toward a better life as defined by opportunities for more acquisition and more status."[62] Lipsitz remarks: "The social relations of the past are used to legitimate a system that in reality works to destroy the world that created those relations in the first place."[63] This is especially true of the Reagan administration's resulting neoconservative movement and their obsessive preservation of the family unit against perceived threats within society's economic and cultural acceleration: the blame for "social disintegration caused by civil and familial vocational privatism,"[64] the behaviors demanded by self-interest and free-market principles, were shifted away from neoconservative ideology and onto the oppositional movements formed to combat it. However, Habermas cautions: "traditions can retain legitimizing force only as long as they are not torn out of interpretive systems that guarantee continuity and identity."[65] The unstable and contradictory processes of late capitalism's legitimizing forces, like television's ability to invoke the past to serve the present, can be easily exposed by making its strength a weakness and drawing focus to its the clash between its message implications of the past and the present. As a result, it is possible for collective memory to finally reveal the conscious strategies that have always been.

The collaging of televisual tropes and symbols from the family sitcom genre in "Ain't it Funny" creates a familiar visual space from our past—one that becomes threatened by Brown's own physical presence, risking the exposure of its nuanced constructions and false realities in the

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[62] Ibid., 381.
[63] Ibid., 381.
[64] Ibid., 383.
[65] Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, 71. Qtd in. George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory," 381.

face of the strange. Here, haunting plays a dual role in the temporal conjuncture of present and past. The images of the idealized, perfect American family on television, and its representation of the prevailing ideologies of the 1980s, is able to haunt in the present on its own; however, it is Brown's physical interaction that brings these images to the context of the present. While these television shows expressed hope and confidence during their time in the past, Brown's presence contradicts this by performing satirical doubt and disillusionment—he, too, becomes a haunting figure in response. These persistences, repetitions and prefigurations of imagery are defining elements of hauntological art and aesthetics that separates itself from traditional nostalgic imagery that we often see, which tends to favor simplistic retro aesthetics and forms.

Ultimately, hauntology is about the dismantling of identity—or *being*. Brown's presence and performance acts as a violent affirmation of late capitalist subjectivity. Fisher quotes Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Commonwealth*:

> [the] revolutionary process of the abolition of identity, we should keep in mind, is monstrous, violent, and traumatic. Don't try to save yourself—in fact, your *self has*, to be sacrificed! This does not mean that liberation casts us into an indifferent sea with no objects or identification, but rather the existing identities will no longer serve as anchors.[66]

In order to create subversive art in late stage capitalism, Brown must let the images and ideals of the past to consume him—he must speak through the language of late capitalism—the visuals, sounds, and other familiarities of the past will never be fully translated into the present, and equally, the present's translation of the past will never be the same twice. Brown does not long for the past but understands how he must go back into the past in order to access the language of the present and to confront the identities created for him.

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[66] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 26.

The Weird

Danny Brown's real pain—his alienation, disassociation and self-destruction—is overwhelming to the simulated televisual family-world of the past, where problems are only easy enough to be resolved within a half-hour programming block. "Ain't It Funny" is Brown's descent into madness— "I'm fucked up and everyone thinks it's a joke," he reveals, seeming to bear the realization that he is being watched for entertainment. Brown's real problems cannot be contained within this format, and although he is surrounded by an audience, his cries for help are only answered with recorded laughter. The demotion from actualized self to just another character through the medium of television is relative to what Brown experiences not only as a cultural figure but as a Black man. Brown's lyrical hook "Ain't it funny how it happens? / *Ain't it?*" achieves both a sense of mourning and mockery. A lifetime spent confronting spectral horrors and his signature mischief converge onto a surreal metaphorical space—trapped together inside of a television show. This is a manic reimagining of his self, but through the perception of otherness.

The resulting sense of unease is what psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud defined as "the uncanny." Experiences of the uncanny are dually disturbing and pleasurable, and characterized through involuntary acts of repetition and doubling. Freud wrote "among those things that are felt to be frightening there must be one group in which it can be shown that the frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns."[67] This group of repressed *things* Freud refers to, that which constitute the uncanny, go beyond effects of fear and fright by simply becoming entangled within our lives, concealed under the guise of ordinary, and even

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[67] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny,* Trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003): 147.

reoccurring, "for this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed."[68] Freud also meditated on the etymology of the uncanny, the "unheimlich," through its linguistic contrary, which "in English translates as 'canny' (originally from the Latin for 'to know') fails to register, is 'heimlich' or 'homely.'"[69] Thus, the estrangement and repression of meaning and its return is related to its conflicted desire to return "home," and further, it is an "overcoming of the split or alienation that is expressed as anxiety about castration (either imagined in the past or feared in the future).[70] Freud's uncanny reflects a desire for union with the mother—its origin. Understanding this within Derrida's hauntology, which insists on "the structure of uncanny haunting itself exemplified by the ghost's return, or more precisely a sense of waiting for its return,"[71] and the atemporality that marks the non-direction of cultural positioning, we gain a sense of the same unfulfilled longing for an eerily familiar home. For Derrida, however, this is a place that was never actually inhabited and therefore cannot be repossessed—it is dispossessed through the interruption of the alien other, of which no place is free to exist without its problematic implications. In typical deconstructionist interpretation, then, we must accept the always-already status of the canny and the uncanny—there is no alternative.

The oscillation between the familiar and strange, the *homely* and *un-homely*, characterizes the duality that formulates the uncanny. Freud concludes that the most easily produced uncanny effect is achieved by collapsing the space in between the real and the imaginary, or "when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes,

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[68] Ibid., 148.
[69] Jay Martin, "The Uncanny Nineties," *Salmagundi* no. 108 (Fall 1995): 21.
[70] Ibid., 21.
[71] Ibid., 23.

and so forth."[72] The collapse of boundaries the uncanny enables, according to Helen Wheatley, is precisely what television is capable of doing; it is a fundamentally domestic medium that enables it to produce an estranging "rendering of homes and families, drawing parallels between the domestic spaces on screen and those homes in which the dramas are being viewed."[73] The uncanny produces itself through performed figurations of character subjectivity and representations of space. In *The Telephone Book*, Avital Ronell explains further how the uncanny phenomenon "recurs through the subject's experience of displacement within technology."[74] She remarks how "the more dreadfully disquieting thing is not the other or an alien; it is, rather, yourself in oldest familiarity with the other, for example, it could be the Double in which you recognize yourself outside of yourself."[75] While Ronell was discussing this confrontation with the double by recognizing your own voice through the hollow echo of the telephone or one of its recorded messages, the way television captures our image acts in a similar way—it is simultaneously ordinary and somehow unsettling. The screens of mediated technologies, such as the television, provides a virtual space "wherein we double ourselves and perform a witnessing of ourselves as other. The uncanniness of mediatized culture is a technological uncanniness."[76] Brown's creation of a fictional double—a doppelgänger of sorts—through the televisual aesthetic of the repeated past, embodies Freud's notions of the uncanny by evoking "an earlier stage when his self was still not fully differentiated from others."[77] Real and imaginary converge on a simulated space with real people playing fictional, televisual versions of their real selves.

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[72] Freud, *The Uncanny*, 150.

[73] Helen Wheatley, "Gothic Television" (PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2002), 23.

[74] Matthew Causey, "The Screen Test of the Double: The Uncanny Performer in the Space of Technology," *Theater Journal* 51, no. 4, Theatre and Technology (Dec. 1999): 385.

[75] Avita Ronell, *The Telephone Book: technology, schizophrenia, electric speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 69. Qtd. in Matthew Causey, "The Screen Test of the Double," 385.

[76] Matthew Causey, "The Screen Test of the Double," 386.

[77] Jay Martin, "The Uncanny Nineties," 21.

The television becomes an apparatus of paradoxical space that collapses notions of reality, time and space. Each figure is an uncanny double of themselves and of a character. Indie film director Gus van Sant, whose personality and behavior mimics the dry absurdity of his actual films, plays the role of the paternal father figure, further complicating this role due to his real-life status as a homosexual. Joanna Kerns, best known for her matriarchal role as Maggie Seaver on television's *Growing Pains*, is again in the role of mother, but subverts her wholesome image with allusions to promiscuous sexual activity. Online "It-Girl" Lauren Avery seems to be suited for the role as the shallow teenaged daughter, but is strangely self-aware of its implications; nonetheless, her Valley-girl, vocal-fried lines double as speech to fellow characters as well as asides to the audience, breaking the fourth wall. The small boy who is not identified by his real name but is only referred to as "This Fucking Kid," plays the comedic relief trope of the family youngster. He has only one line (Ohhh, Uncle Danny!) that he delivers twice throughout the video—his eventual demonic regression challenges his televisual symbolism of childlike innocence. His catchphrase in particular implies repetition on his own behalf, but also on Brown's—cyclical behaviors of self-abuse and mental anguish become a condition of ordinary entertainment under the casual dismissiveness of "Ohhh Uncle Danny!" Brown especially plays with his multiple identities: himself as a Black man, himself as a rap artist, himself as a television character, himself as an addict—he is incapable, however, of depicting himself as an actualized self, only as an uncanny double.

Dualities occur throughout "Ain't It Funny," such as Brown's use of horror and humor. The effects of horror and humor are undeniably different: the psychological feelings commonly associated with humor include a "sense of release and sensations of lightness and expansion"; however, those associated with horror, "are feelings of pleasure, heaviness, and

claustrophobia."[78] And although it would seem that these opposite effects are not capable of being attached to the same stimulus, "Ain't It Funny" proves otherwise. Media theorist Nöel Carroll notes a confluence of horror and humor found within theory, but specifically within Freud's texts. Closing in on the subject of horror, *The Uncanny* argues that its object is also the "manifestation of repressed, unconscious modes of thinking,"[79] and curiously, Freud had also identified the object of wit, or jokework, as such. Thus, according to Carroll's interpretation of Freud, "the road to comic laughter and the road to feelings of uncanniness are unaccountably the same."[80] The presence of horror and humor in "Ain't it Funny" are curiously recursive, each often representing the processes to which the other refers. The ways these concepts double and repeat reflect back on Freud's description of the uncanny. Danny Brown's self-destructive behaviors are as funny as they are uncomfortable when performed in a televisual context where they should not exist. The sitcom format further confuses the boundaries between horror and humor by elements such as the laugh-track and its seemingly inappropriate cues (after all, canned audience responses are limited wherein only a few different emotions can be expressed—horror not being one of them) and the instances of captioned text, which also estranges language from nuanced orality.

The phrase "ain't it funny how it happens?" itself implies a lighthearted retrospection, and directs towards a foundational cue in the family sitcom's textual history, as mentioned earlier, the neat, tidy resolution of conflict at the end of the basic family sitcom episode. Television episodes and their endings like these provided double work: the feel-good resolution of a narrative and a subtle return to the beginning of the episode acting as a reiteration of the

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[78] Noël Carroll, "Horror and Humor," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 145.

[79] Ibid., 146.

[80] Ibid., 146.

program's thematic ethos. For "Ain't It Funny," there is no resolution—its nihilism is best represented in an instance wherein van Sant's character tries to comfort Brown by reassuring him: "none of us feels okay." Additionally, Brown's lyrical hook in the closing of "Ain't It Funny" accompanied by video's bottom caption revealing his last words, "I'm glad you found my pain entertaining. Goodbye." (Fig. 17) refers back to title and theme of the deranged television show, sending off audiences only for them to return and tune in next time. The passive viewer, who has learned to expect the easy resolution and happy endings from family sitcom programming the music video refers to, instead becomes a participant through its strange, mocking query: "*ain't it funny?*"

Indeed, Brown's tele-technologized presence in "Ain't It Funny" is layered upon multiple modes of the uncanny. Mark Fisher's *The Weird and the Eerie* expands upon Freud's theory of the uncanny and its preoccupation with the strange through his concepts the "weird" and the "eerie." Fisher explains that the weird and the eerie go beyond "the idea that we 'enjoy what scares us,'" and that these concepts are largely concerned with an attraction to the outside, "for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience."[81] The easiest way to differentiate the weird and the eerie is to consider the difference between presence and absence: the weird comes from a presence that does not belong, and the eerie is a result of when something should be present but is instead absent. While Freud's theory of the uncanny is about the strangely familiar, the strange within the familiar and the familiar as strange, Fisher's concepts operate from the outside and into the familiar in order to reveal a particular type of perturbation. Fisher explains:

> The wider predilection for the *unheimlich* is commensurate with a
> compulsion towards a certain kind of critique, which operates by
> always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the

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[81] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie,* 8.

> inside. The weird and the eerie make the opposite move: they allow us to see the inside from the perspective of the outside. As we shall see, the weird is that *which does not belong.* The weird brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled with the 'homely' (even as its negation). The form that is perhaps most appropriate to the weird is montage—the conjoining of *two or more things which do not belong together.* Hence the predilection within surrealism for the weird, which understood the unconscious as a montage-machine, a generator of weird juxtapositions.[82]

The presence of the weird, as Fisher describes, disrupts the psyche by its sense of feeling wrong, or "out of place." Brown's presence in "Ain't It Funny" represents this kind of disturbance and sensation of wrong-feeling that is the weird; "a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here."[83] Whether it is due to his atemporality, behavior, and his Blackness, Brown is clearly occupying spaces in which he does not belong—he is the weird. By allowing us to see the inside through the perspective of the outside, Brown is exercising his "double consciousness," as Du Bois described. Further, Brown's work, through his pastiche-building, electronic and cultural sampling, and ability to combine contrasting elements, is like what Fisher described the unconscious as a "montage-machine." We are all, in a sense, montage-machines in the present. Similarly, J.G. Ballard believed that collage was the primary artform of the twentieth century and understood how "the mediatized unconscious was a collage artist."[84] In "Ain't It Funny," we see the space of television as a personal landscape that is both shaped by, and produced from, our drives and desires—the televisual space is one that we live within, and not the other way around. Our true selves within

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[82] Ibid., 10-11.
[83] Ibid., 15.
[84] Mark Fisher, "The Assassination of J.G. Ballard," in *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)* (London: Repeater Books, 2018): 75.

the televisual space cannot be fully realized, but only assembled through the repetition of patterns and impulses.

This sensation that follows the weird challenges our perception and invalidates our conceptions we normally use to make sense of the world. Brown's confrontation with the weird is the realization that "the concepts and frameworks which we have previously employed are now obsolete,"[85] as it allows the outside to open up the framework of the inside, represented here as the ideology of the family sitcom—and the neoliberal utopian promises of the future—in an attempt to expose its reality as false. The encoded messages and ideals represented in the family sitcom of the past not only seem wrong in the present, but irresponsible. Brown doubles back on the sitcom and uses it for his own message from the present. It, too, resonates strangely in another time.

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[85] Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie,* 13.

CHAPTER 4:

"When It Rain"

In "Ain't It Funny," Brown confronts our cultural reliance on nostalgic-driven televisual media and its recycled exploitative ideologies of the past through his own presence. By creating a temporal disjuncture and subverting the boundaries between character and reality, he represents a different and difficult truth in contrast to the feel-good 1980s ideology within popular television. Media scholar Neil Postman, in his seminal book on television, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) wrote, "Truth, like time itself, is a product of a conversation man has with himself about and through the techniques of communication he has invented."[86] The disjointed time of simulated televisual recordings and Brown's retrofitting of self within tele-technological media reveals an uncanny mirror in the television screen. Whereas Brown exposed the ideological American Dream home through the weird with "Ain't It Funny," the music video for "When It Rain" searches through traces of the past to locate a home that is authentic in the present; their strategies are similar but yield different modes of strange.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the uncanny focuses on the strange within the familiar and "operates by always processing the outside through the gaps and impasses of the inside," which is to say, the uncanny is centered on the self. Mark Fisher's concepts of the weird and the eerie describe a similar notion but decenters the human figure by operating from the other direction—the outside. The weird and the eerie, and its reflections on agency through presence and absence, continues the investigation into Jacques Derrida's hauntology. As Derrida argued that *to be* is precisely to be *haunted*, we gain a suspicion of how we may be subject to

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[86] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985): 24.

unseen forces—drives, desires and experiences that which we see doubled, repeated, contradicted, shadowed and othered through notions of the weird and eerie. These hauntings are surreptitiously present in every day moments, reminding us that things may not be what they seem.

Fisher's counterpart to the weird, known as "the eerie," governs space by absence as opposed to presence: the weird results from a presence that clearly does not belong, so much so that it overwhelms our ability to make sense of its intrusion, while the eerie results from a failure of presence or from a failure of absence, or as Fisher describes, a sensation that occurs when "there is something present where there should be nothing, or if there is nothing present when there should be something."[87] Weirdness creeps along the edges between worlds and eeriness lingers throughout the ruins of lost worlds.

The concept of the eerie is closely tied to the fundamental metaphysical questions we often apply in addressing existence and non-existence: "*Why is there something here when there should be nothing? Why is there nothing here when there should be something?*"[88] The first mode of eerie (*the failure of absence*) is understood through Fisher's example concerning the notion of an "eerie cry." A distant bird's cry becomes eerie when we begin to feel as if there is something more to this cry than the simple explanation of normal animal behavior—"that there is some kind of intent at work, a form of intent that we do not usually associate with a bird."[89] The eerie involves a deeper speculation and feeling of suspense: "*Is* there something anomalous about this bird's cry? What exactly is strange about it? Is, perhaps, the bird possessed—and if it is, by what kind of entity?"[90] This act of speculation provides a foundation to the eerie, as the

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[87] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie,* 61.
[88] Ibid., 12. Italics are authors
[89] Ibid., 62.
[90] Ibid., 62.

eerie concerns itself with the enigmatic and the unknown. Such mysteries must also provide a sense of otherness, "a feeling that the enigma might involve forms of knowledge, subjectivity and sensation that lie beyond common experience."[91] The moment these enigmas are resolved, the eerie immediately disappears.

The second mode of eerie (*failure of presence*) is a sensation often reserved for abandoned structures, particularly when dealing with the enigma of a past time, a symbolic entity or a spectral force. Fisher elaborates:

> A sense of the eerie seldom clings to enclosed and inhabited domestic spaces; we find the eerie more readily in landscapes partially emptied of the human. […] the eerie is fundamentally tied up with questions of agency. What kind of agent is acting here? Is there an agent at all? These questions can be posed in a psychoanalytic register—if we are not who we think we are, what are we? —but they can also apply to the forces governing capitalist society. Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity.[92]

Here, the eerie is elevated from its mundane, everyday usage and gains a conceptual diligence: *places* are especially prone to eeriness—empty landscapes, lone structures, architectural ruins and abandoned homes exist independently from human subjects. These desolate spaces and their lack of occupation and intervention from humans invite a new speculation into their own sense of agency, one that is obscured in some way. Gazing upon these ruins requires a confrontation with a mystery that may never be resolved or with a past that cannot return. The eerie is conjured with a simple question: *what happened here?*

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[91] Ibid., 62.
[92] Ibid., 11.

"When It Rain"

As we have witnessed in "Ain't It Funny," Brown is familiar with oscillating between past and present themes in his work through aural and visual metaphors. The music video for his 2016 single "When It Rain" is a fitting example of Brown's creative practices that goes further to investigate spectral emissions of identity and memory through analog and digital components. This hauntological practice allows Brown to mediate different worlds of being and different periods of time, endlessly navigating a perpetual state of becoming. His use of sampling and collage with excerpts of found recordings, TV programs, familiar musical and televisual signals together form a picture that embodies the material of memory. The simulated VHS televisual aesthetic of "When It Rain" becomes a haunting medium because it grants a new spirit to a dead format—a visual nod to television's vast archive of images and its influence on our memory. These surreal transmissions of the psyche take shape through the wavering loss of signal and a lingering dreamlike calm of the eerie.

The music video "When It Rain," directed by Mimi Cave, reads as a DIY televisual montage of found VHS footage compiled with images of street-style dancing (Fig. 18), recorded television shows (Fig. 19) and drive-by footage of Detroit's desolate neighborhoods (Fig. 20) and landmarks (Fig. 21), all of which intersect with Brown's performance that takes place throughout a derelict residential property in his neighborhood of Linwood, Detroit (Fig. 22). The static footage, inverted colors, glitches and other VHS "noise" begins to build the chaotic and distorted *mise-en-scene* that looks ripped from amateur footage found on a damaged videotape. Its chopped, shaking, non-linearity and schizophrenic flashing of images parallel Brown's manic lyrical screed about growing up in Detroit amidst violence, drugs and poverty. Brown reveals all kinds of hardships in "When It Rain" and, like "Ain't It Funny," its title reveals a dual meaning.

The old idiom "when it rains, it pours" itself describes how when something bad happens it tends to continually repeat itself and become worse and is used by Brown to address the ways in which his own life as well as the city of Detroit have experienced a downward spiral.[93] Brown also reinterprets this line at the end of the first verse and into the first bridge of the song to describe gunfire:

> No umbrella, we stuck in the rain
> Dark clouds be hanging all over our head
> No sunshine and them showers be lead
> […]
> Oh, you ain't know that
> When it rain, when it pour, get your ass on the floor now
> Oh, you ain't know that, did you?
> Better duck when you hear them gunshots go off
> Pop off and all them shots go off

The song's lyrics express the strange paradox similar to the smirking nihilism of "Ain't It Funny" but delivered with less shocking imagery—lines such as "heater off safety[94] / watching the Pistons" radically illustrate Brown's experiences as one of natural ordinariness that only the landscape of Detroit could provide. The looming threat of death, an absence, is accepted as a natural way of being.

The enigma behind "When It Rain" is the city of Detroit through the static haze of a lost transmission; the landscape's lingering forms, gaps and traces from a vaguely familiar past are magnetically inscribed into a VHS mixtape. "When It Rain" is a highly complex exploration of the penetrating aura of technology on our memory processes, and how it affects and reflects cultural and personal memory. The videotape, now an obsolete technology, still maintains close ties to personal experience within a certain era of the past. In "When It Rain," we are never quite clear on what we are seeing, and thus, we are never quite clear on where its content came from.

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[93] Coincidentally, "Downward Spiral" is the title of the opening track on Brown's *Atrocity Exhibition.*
[94] "Heater" is a slang term that refers to a firearm, often a handgun such as the 9mm.

The music video reconstitutes the landscape of Detroit through televisual failure; the simulation of VHS remanence decay creates a haunting televisual space where the signal repeatedly goes missing. The conceptual framing of an "aesthetics of remanence," as introduced by media scholar Jonathan Rozenkrantz, "connects the material conditions of magnetic tape with analog video's aesthetic expressions, and the cultural situation in which analogue video finds itself today."[95] For Brown, the "VHS look"—its remanence decay—is significant to a certain era in history where his own personal upbringing and experiences were becoming defined. The mimicry of videotape remanence becomes an experiment in visually recapturing a memory once mediated through electromagnetic waves. Like videotape, memory remains unclear—it is systemically reliant on time and doomed to deteriorate with age. Memory, visually represented through aesthetics of remanence, takes form in the fuzzy distortion, wandering static lines and flashes of saturated color. Within this hauntological aesthetic, Brown is not concerned with achieving a full resolution of the past; here, memories are defined by their imperfect recovery.

Through hauntological strategy, Brown reconstructs the places, times and moods of real and virtual landscapes of his youth. His use of dated televisual aesthetics as a materialization of memory in "When It Rain" doubles against the backdrop of his hometown Detroit, embodying the second mode of the eerie (*the failure of presence*) in a multitude of ways. The loss of visual information in "When It Rain" is exemplary of how sometimes "a disappearance can be more haunting than an apparition,"[96] and continues to gain significance in its visual treatment of Detroit's urban ruins. Within technology's imperfect recovery, Detroit's "eerie power of landscape" doubles as a haunting materialization of the ways in which, according to Fisher,

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[95] Jonathan Rozenkrantz, "Analogue Video in the Age of Retrospectacle: Aesthetics, Technology, Subculture," *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 12 (Winter 2016): 39.
[96] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 122.

"physical spaces condition perception, and the ways particular terrains are stained by traumatic events."[97] What once defined Detroit is missing—the eerie feeling summoned from physical ruins and other looming, abandoned structures stand in mourning to Detroit's historic and cultural role in imagining of a future utopia. In the post-apocalyptic urban landscape we see in the present, eeriness abounds.

Brown's aural and visual treatment often illustrates non-linear time and eerie images of dystopian modernity, so it is fitting that his album *Atrocity Exhibition* refers to New Wave science fiction writer J.G. Ballard's experimental book of essays by the same title, published in 1970. This parallel is especially apparent in "When It Rain," which leans heavily towards the characteristic fictional milieu of Ballard's writing by creating a technologized time and space amongst a bleak landscape. The lush overgrowth creeping throughout the husks of manmade structures throughout Detroit in "When It Rain" is reminiscent of another Ballard novel, *The Drowned World* (1976), which imagines a post-diluvial city of London, where empty buildings stood half-submerged in swamps while below the surface, abandoned cars have settled sixty feet below water. The dwindling numbers of human civilization have lost dominance over the city; it has been engulfed by a regressive nature. The main protagonist and members of his survey team begin to experience strange dreams, almost as if they are being spoken to by distant echoes of their surroundings. These eerie dreams prompt one character to wonder aloud: "Is it only the external landscape which is altering? How often recently most of us have had the feeling of déjà vu, of having seen all this before, in fact of remembering these swamps and lagoons all too well."[98] Through its post-apocalyptic setting, Ballard's novel reveals there is no solution for

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[97] Ibid., 97.

[98] JG Ballard, *The Drowned World* (United Kingdom: Berkley Books, 1962), accessed 19 September 2018, Internet Archive. https://archive.org/details/BallardJGBallardJGTheDrownedWorldbOk.xyz/page/n1

humans to reverse the negative effects on this environment—instead, one must accept and assimilate.

Understanding how Ballard had described his inspiration for *The Drowned World* as a fusion of his childhood memories of growing up in Shanghai and of his adult life in London, a similar strategy surfaces in "When It Rain." Brown also addresses a fragmented psyche of childhood memory, elaborated through televisual imagery, and his experiences of Detroit's landscapes in the present. While Ballard's novel depicted an apocalyptic downfall as a result of global warming, this notion of a "man-made catastrophe" reaches a new articulation in Detroit's historical timeline and its loose post-apocalyptic frame in the present. Brown's video does not settle long on the derelict homes and the overgrown moss and thicket, ignored infrastructure and city landmarks: it is a rare depiction of these areas throughout the video as they only linger just long enough to provoke a deeper stoicism. Human figures begin to occupy the empty spaces and communicate a new technologized memory of this landscape through physical representation. As a result, a strange hybrid landscape of past and present is conjured, developing its own hauntology as it gains new life in death; it is marked by both its presence and its absence. The static and glitching loss of signal over a dark and largely unpopulated landscape becomes more mysterious by the growing presence of a world left behind. Under the heavy weight of history and memory, what do we choose to remember?

Detroit

It is not possible to understand Detroit's landscape today without acknowledging the convoluted weave of its socioeconomic and cultural points anchored deep within the beginning of the twentieth-century. During the 1940s, Detroit was a rapidly growing industrial boomtown

that boasted the highest-paid blue-collar work in the United States, and by the 1950s, it became the fourth largest city in the country, following New York City, Philadelphia and Chicago.[99] The city was recognized as a symbol of hard-working American ingenuity for the beginning half of the twentieth century, earning itself the title "the most modern city in the world, the city of tomorrow."[100]

It was during this time that the city of Detroit was defined as the epicenter of the automobile industry's force: up to 125 auto companies, including the "Big Three" firms—General Motors, Ford Motor Company and Chrysler Corporation—called Detroit home. Out of all the major automobile manufacturers, no other company has proven itself to be the most influential to the foundation of the modern auto industry. Ford's introduction of the assembly line became a standard model for mass production in post-war America.[101] The company also rolled out social service programs to its employees—otherwise known as early instances of "welfare capitalism"— as founder Henry Ford (1863-1947) equated the value of an employee's health and welfare to the quality and efficiency of their work. The influence of Ford's innovations throughout Detroit's automobile industry and beyond earned itself the term "Fordism" as a way to describe the "technologically advanced, labor-intensive, highly productive form of modern industrial capitalism"[102] that emerged as a result. As the industry extended far beyond metropolitan Detroit and into smaller, surrounding cities throughout the upper Midwest, a rise of auto-related manufacturers occurred. By the mid-twentieth century, the automotive

[99] Jerry Herron, "I Remember Detroit," *Shrinking Cities: Detroit*, 3 (March 2004): 33. Accessed 20 March 2018, http://www.shrinkingcities.com/fileadmin/shrink/downloads/pdfs/WP-Band_III_Detroit.pdf
[100] Jacqui Alexander, "Detroit: Life Between the Gaps," *Post Magazine*, 1 August 2008, accessed 20 March 2018. http://postmagazine.org/detroit-life-between-the-gaps/
[101] Incorporated in 1903 by Henry Ford (b. 1863)
[102] Thomas J. Sugrue, "Motor City: The Story of Detroit," *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History* (September 2014), Accessed 20 March 2018, http://gdelaurier.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/85732135/Motor%20City_%20The%20Story%20of...pdf

industry was at its economic peak,[103] finding itself directly and indirectly responsible for employing one out of every six working Americans.[104] The generous wages and attractive employee benefits being offered by the Big Three specifically placed auto workers among the best paid in the country, and in turn, these workers reemerged as an example of the end of class conflict: the middle-class American.

This peak was relatively short-lived, however, and by the late 1960s, Detroit automotive plants were hemorrhaging jobs at a critical pace. Detroit's deindustrialization began with decentralizing production: manufacturers ventured out in search for less expensive land and labor, and further experimented with "automation"—new labor-saving technologies that allowed assembly-line jobs to be replaced with machines—which proved to be the most devastating to the workforce. The dependence of surrounding cities such as Toledo, Ohio, and Flint, Michigan, on the auto industry led to today's familiar aphorism: "When Detroit gets a cold, the whole Midwest gets pneumonia."[105]

The economic dependence on the automobile industry paralleled the intense, persisting racial conflict and inequality occurring throughout Detroit and its metropolitan area. The African American migration to Detroit started after World War I with many Black southerners to follow after World War II. Henry Ford and the Ford Motor Company recruited many of these southern migrants, and by 1940 Ford was among the largest private employers of African Americans in the United States.[106] The Black population of Detroit increased from "sixteen percent in 1950 to forty-five percent in 1970."[107] During this time, members of the Black community were slowly

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[103] According to Sugrue, the economic peak years of the automotive industry fell roughly between the years 1948 and 1967.

[104] Thomas J. Sugrue, "Motor City: The Story of Detroit"

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Bill McGraw, "Life in the Ruins of Detroit," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 63 (Spring, 2007): 297.

migrating out of the ghettos to which they had been confined; however, their movement into

surrounding white neighborhoods was often met with bureaucratic red tape and even violence

from nearby residents, but mostly, white people simply packed up and moved outside of the city

to the suburban neighborhoods. Thus, while Detroit's Black population increased between 1950

and 1970, the opposite occurred with its white population, which lost more than 700,000

people.[108]

As the city's white population was suburbanizing, Detroit's deindustrialization occurred

as hundreds of thousands of Black Americans were arriving in the city only to find their promise

of high-paying, entry-level industrial jobs disappearing. Historian Thomas J. Sugrue remarks:

> A growing number of urban residents, especially young African
> Americans, find themselves detached from the mainstream
> economy, often outside the labor market altogether.
> Unemployment and poverty are certainly not new features of
> American urban life. […] In previous periods of American history,
> poverty and unemployment were endemic, but poor people did not
> experience the same degree of segregation and isolation as it exists
> today. And in the past, most poor people were active, if irregular,
> participants in the labor market.[109]

Detroit's overwhelming combination of economic restructuring and racial discord following

World War II created divisions throughout American jobs and neighborhoods. Inequality would

find new ways to be shaped and contested in postwar cities like Detroit and elsewhere, often

within labor and housing markets. The complex and pervasive tactics of racial discrimination

that plagued Black laborers upon their arrival in the North would ensure that they would suffer

disproportionately the effects of deindustrialization and urban decline. For a large number of

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[108] Ibid., 298.

[109] Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014): 4.

Black Americans, the image of steady, secure and well-paid employment in the North proved to be false.

In the summer of 1967, racial tensions in Detroit erupted into a series of riots initially caused due to tensions between the Black community and local police and eventually culminated with military intervention. These events continue to be deeply embedded within the Detroit narrative and is often cited as the moment marking the city's downfall, choosing to mainly focus on the destruction it caused. This narrative would find reinforcement through the alarming number of media-circulated images that showed Black men engaging in aggressive and hostile scenes throughout downtown Detroit. Further, these images were the first prominent visual examples of Black people living in Detroit, despite the preceding years of being present in local workplaces and neighborhoods. Americans all over the country were exposed to images of Black men and women being confronted by armed military in what resembled a downtown war zone. However invisible or unwelcome the Black community had been in the past, they soon became easy to blame.

Cities such as Detroit have had to continue addressing its history of internal racial conflict. Scholar Fiona Jeffries has argued "wars against 'internal enemies' have been simultaneously beset with neoliberal structural adjustments and a paradoxical para-militarization of urban cultures."[110] She has also pointed out how historical political repression intersected with "widespread fear of police and criminal violence, a collapsing moral economy of poor neighborhoods, and the neoliberal retreat of the social state"[111] is responsible for the authoritarian socialization of fear—weaponized fear had revealed itself to be an "increasingly

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[110] Fiona Jeffries, "Reappropriating the City of Fear," *Space and Culture* 17, no. 3 (2013): 255
[111] Ibid., 255.

productive aspect of urban neoliberalism."[112] The implications of images circulated by media and its subsequent narratives continue to reproduce and internalize neoliberal ideology not as the effect of Detroit's downfall, but framing it as an ignored solution. Prominent media outlet archives reveal a nostalgia connected to Detroit's Golden Age as white and upper-class, erasing all evidence of Black people living and working in the city. It is only until later when they became visible, when the archives instead featured them in images related to violence and urban deterioration. These images were significant in shaping the Black community as incongruous with the nostalgic image of Detroit, and thus used to operate as a looming threat to the neoliberal movement.

Since the 1980s, Detroit has been defined by its geographical inequality: since the "white flight," suburban areas have become synonymous with conservative principles, meanwhile, urban areas within the city of Detroit have been depicted as a dystopian wasteland—framed as a product of resistance to progress. Along with the economic and technological factors that worked to reconfigure the sociospatial organization of Detroit's urban landscape,[113] Detroit as a "model city" has changed its meaning completely, "reemerging as a repository of fear"[114] and becoming an archetypal cliché of postindustrial urban decline; its poverty, violence, corruption and physical decay stand in contrast to its recent history and the early rhetoric that implied success. The past proclamations of Detroit as the future of America— "the city of tomorrow"—is a haunting echo in the present, embodying the insecurities and fears of American society. The empty houses in "When It Rain" belie their origins deeply rooted in the American Dream of

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[112] Ibid., 254-255.
[113] Alessio Kolioulis, "Borderlands: Dub Techno's Hauntological Politics of Acoustic Ecology," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 7, no. 2 (2015): 73.
[114] Fiona Jeffries, "Reappropriating the City of Fear," 262.

home ownership, now a dwindling privilege for the following generations. Without this sense of security, what is left?

Given the continuous deterioration of the global economy, it has become increasingly discernible that Detroit's fate predicts "a future of all cities and countries in (what has passed from the 'developed' to) the *un*developed world."[115] As we trudge further into the new millennium, the alleged fruits promised by those who lauded our country's post-industrial economy in the past are consistently becoming exposed as delusory phantoms—these fantasies may have mimicked success in the past, but according to scholar Richard Pope, "only through self-perpetuating boosterist bubbles and rising debt levels."[116] The Trump administration's obsession with promises to return to this once-rising standard of living, to "Make America Great Again" fails to acknowledge how dimensionally problematic this specific past they desire is, and thus, whatever ideal they seek remains impossible to gain a true body in the present; this is especially evident in the case of Detroit. Pope continues:

> As the "knowledge economy" is increasingly revealed as a dissimulation we are left to face with the ruins of modernity, literally in the case of Detroit. The most tragic aspect of the end, the dreaded "apocalypse" which has thereby *already* happened, is that we will never be able to point to an event which has precipitated this demise, for it is in the nature of this demise to have foreclosed the historical dimension *by which* we might recognize such an event. For Detroiters, there is, despite the failed attempts to point to the race riots of 1967, no *one* event which precipitated the demise of the city, but rather an interminably long series of events and, moreover, "structural transformations," piling one on top of the other like the ruins of the city.[117]

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[115] Richard Pope, "Hooked on an Affect: Detroit Techno and Dystopian Digital Culture," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 2, no. 1 (2011): 25.
[116] Ibid., 25.
[117] Ibid., 25-6.

Pope continues to address Detroit's case as one embedded within the "ontological oblivion of 'late capitalism,'"[118] thus, a dystopian experience of the city's deterioration and dismantlement. He makes the comparison of how Baudelaire's *flâneur* strolled the streets of Paris in search of modernity, while Detroit's citizens are left to be a witness to modernity's demise. By the early 1990s, this ontological oblivion became confronted by the emergent second generation of Detroit techno music producers.[119]

The rise of Detroit techno music and culture was a process of creation enabled by the city's implosion and is well reflected in what music historian Dan Sicko had described as "the beauty of decay."[120] Haunted by its past glory, and faced with a lack of opportunities, the youth of Detroit had to create its own sense of leisure and nightlife. Detroit techno faced the ontological oblivion of late capitalism by simply "observing and playing to the real of its environment, but also, and *concurrently*, by remediating and developing prior imaginings of the future."[121] Understanding how this ontological oblivion of late capitalism constructs, and is constructed by, the mediation, negotiation and percolation of prior cultural myths, Detroit artists engaged in similar retrofuturist strategies by revisiting prior visions of the future. Further, many of these historically and culturally-dated, fictional imaginings of the future are physically imprinted within Detroit's urban landscape—the city itself was upheld as a utopian vision of the future throughout the twentieth century, but now it "must face, every day, the reversibility of utopian capitalist fantasy and partial reality into dystopian capitalist reality."[122] These sonic

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[118] Ibid., 26.

[119] Pope makes the distinction between Detroit techno and its dystopian experience to the earlier, more popular European forms of techno that which is often "associated with the utopian 'eu(ro)phoria' that greeted the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989."

[120] Dan Sicko, *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk, 2nd Ed.* (Detroit: Painted Turtle Press, 2010): 59.

[121] Richard Pope, "Hooked on an Affect," 26.

[122] Ibid., 26.

metanarratives from Detroit techno artists, as a result, reveal "a deep and affective connection with the city and its failed future politics that stress the hauntological ambiguities of Detroit's dystopian/utopian techno sound."[123] A warning of our technological future lies within techno music's foundational ethos—"a future which is felt, according to a dystopian outlook, to be already, irrevocably, 'here.'"[124] It is the work of mourning for a future that failed us.

"When It Rain" makes reference to Detroit techno's hauntological sound by fusing together the eerie futuristic techno of "Pot Au Feu"[125] (1968) from BBC Radiophonic Workshop artist Delia Derbyshire with a pounding four-on-the-floor beat pattern. These two samples together simultaneously summon and suspend an implied future shock of the past, but Brown is comfortable flirting with a temporal nowhere:

> You ain't heard it like this before
> They don't do it like this no more
> That get on up, that get on up
> That get on up, up on the floor

While the last two verses are assumedly in reference to the "Godfather of Soul" James Brown and his popular hit "Get Up (I Feel Like Being a) Sex Machine," the presence of Derbyshire's music—posthumously best known for arranging the proto-electronica track (composed by Rob Grainer), which served as the original opening score to the BBC science-fiction series *Dr. Who*[126]— points further back in time to establish a foundational reference for Brown's context. Derbyshire's music is significant here because electronic music from World War II until the

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[123] Alessio Kolioulis, "Borderlands," 74.

[124] Richard Pope, "Hooked on an Affect," 38.

[125] "Pot au feu" refers to a foundational French dish akin to a basic meat stew. It has been described as a dish that "honours the tables of the rich and poor alike." Carole Cadwalladr, "Interview with Raymond Blanc," *Observer Food Monthly* no. 117 (February 2011): 26. Accessed 15 September 2018, https://web.archive.org/web/20111008053221/http://www.raymondblanc.com/Portals/14/docs/OFM%20Feb%202011.pdf

[126] Frances Morgan, "Delian Modes: Listening for Delia Derbyshire in Histories of Electronic Dance Music," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 9, no. 1 (2017): 10.

early 1990s had been synonymous with a sense of the future, "so much so that film and television would habitually turn to electronic music when it wanted to invoke the future."[127] Now, electronic music no longer sounds "futuristic," nor is it capable of "evoking a future that [feels] strange or dissonant;"[128] it is now a reminder of the accelerated banality that marks postmodern life. Brown's use of this sample creates an eerie phenomenon where the imagined utopias from the past begin to haunt the present—time collapses into one space: Detroit's landscape in "When It Rain" addresses the ways in which any given sense of the present is responsible for mediation of past and future. It exposes the same hauntological ambiguities early techno producers sought to engage with through similar retrofuturist strategy. Detroit is neither dead nor alive, but like ghosts, it is elusive—its "presence confounds the desire to separate the past and the present."[129]

Through the lens of "When It Rain," Detroit becomes an uncanny place that complicates not only a linear sense of time, but its own historicism. Derrida writes, "the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come, or come back."[130] Thus, Detroit remains to be a revenant of the past that is always present.

Ghettotech

Detroit nightlife into the 1990s merged with the techno music scene by the inclusion of hip-hop interplay, taking form as a skillfully fast-paced, bass-driven experimental musical genre called Ghettotech. While techno and hip-hop experienced radically different cultural movements, their similar beginnings emerged "from Black cultural productions within an urban,

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[127] Mark Fisher, "What is Hauntology," 16.
[128] Ibid., 16.
[129] Nabeel Zuberi, "Is This the Future?" 284.
[130] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, 48

postindustrial, post-disco context,"[131] and the genre of Ghettotech represents a curious alignment

of all these elements under the definition of Detroit culture. Its name was inspired by Black

working-class urban life in Detroit as a source of the real. The Ghettotech genre as a whole left

out themes of "gangsterism" in favor of "more quotidian, sometimes mundane, but more often

sexual topics"[132] which deviated from the commodified direction hip-hop culture was evolving

towards by the late 1990s. It was humorous, sexual, hedonistic and overall exuded a smirking

deviance—as serious and sincere DJs and producers in the scene were about their craft, it was

Ghettotech's immaturity that captured the imagination.

Brown's music, especially "When It Rain," is undeniably rooted within the Ghettotech

index. The lyrical content of "When It Rain" is a rich trove of references to Detroit's community

legacies, a manifesto to the city that navigates a duality between an appreciation of the city's

cultural history and expression of that same city's conditions for survival in the present. Brown

references early electronic house music tracks such as "Problem #13" (1992) from Johnny

Dangerous and "Hit It from The Back" (1994) from Traxmen and Eric Martin. Following the

track's first hook, the line "time for the percolator" is a nod to a famous electronic house music

staple that dominated the early club scenes in Detroit and Chicago, the 1992 track "Coffee Pot

(It's Time for the Percolator)" by Cajmere. Furthermore, as Brown says this line, the tempo is

now more noticeably heard with the kick drum playing a fast and heavy "four-on-the-floor"[133]

rhythm pattern. This sense of speed is a definitive style of Ghettotech; historically, the genre's

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[131] Gavin Mueller, "'Straight Up Detroit Shit': Genre, Authenticity, and Appropriation in Detroit Ghettotech" (MA thesis, Graduate College of Bowling Green State University, 2007), 11.

[132] Ibid., 40.

[133] The phrase "four on the floor" is a beat in techno music: an unaccented 4/4-time pattern where each beat is marked by a heavy kick drum. Obviously boring at normal volume, high level volumes of these beats are enough to resonate throughout one's entire body.

pacing was directly influenced by DJ styles heard in Detroit strip clubs, thus the genre gained

other monikers such as "booty house." Veteran Ghettotech DJ Gary Chandler elaborates:

> The speed of the music came from the titty bars; they always
> played the music faster than we did on the streets. If you heard a
> record that you were used to hearing on 33, it was always on 45 in
> the titty bars because the girls danced real fast. But in time, the
> speed of the titty bars was the same speed as on the streets—
> everything caught up.[134]

Another staple of Ghettotech, DJ Assault, responsible for quintessential club anthem "Ass N

Titties" (1997), claimed the genre's penchant for raunchy lyrics was just circumstantial to the DJ

gig: "It was just some ill stuff to say in the club on the mic," he notes, concluding, "if it's

offensive, you take life too serious."[135] Brown's own lyrics throughout his discography often

feature similar explicit themes to that of Ghettotech, often reflecting a similar sense of humor.

With "When It Rain," Brown gives direct salute to DJ Assault through his own local crew,

Bruiser Brigade: "DJ Assault, bitch, let me bang / Bruiser Brigade, we run that train." Similarly,

Brown mentions the Rambisco (That Detroit shit / do the Rambisco), a variation of the older "jit"

dance style of Detroit, that relies on fast footwork combinations, drops, spins and improvisations.

Similar to what "popping" was to the West Coast hip-hop, and "breaking" was to East Coast hip-

hop, Detroit's own style of dance accompanied by Ghettotech is deeply rooted in the city's social

history. The jit style revival through Ghettotech met the increased tempo of the genre and

increased its regional exposure and popularity throughout clubs and even on television, featured

regularly on the public access show, "The Scene,"[136] later renamed "The New Dance Show."

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[134] Ben Ewy, "Ghetto Tech," *Global Darkness,* accessed 20 March 2018.
https://www.globaldarkness.com/articles/ghettotech1.html
[135] Ray Philp, "Ghettotech: An Oral History: The Definitive Story of Detroit's Dirty Little Genre," *Red Bull Music Academy*, May 2017. Accessed March 2018. http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/05/ghettotech-oral-history
[136] Gavin Mueller, "'Straight Up Detroit Shit,'" 13.

"When It Rain" features these styles of dance throughout (Fig. 23) (Fig. 24), emulating a bootleg VHS aesthetic that vaguely looks produced in the 1990s Ghettotech era. In *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright*, author Lucas Hilderbrand remarks how the bootlegger's role was not "limited to distribution but is also aesthetic and affective. Because the tapes have primarily circulated through personal connections, they also become souvenirs of relationships."[137] "When It Rain" and its VHS aesthetic reflects the kind of expanded reach that personal media allowed during the recent past, before the Internet. Through the encapsulation of subcultural attitudes and documentation of the ethereal, bootleg media addresses the cultural gaps left by official releases by providing counter-narratives. The endurance of VHS tapes within particular subcultural sites, as represented in "When It Rain," once functioned as a symbolic barrier to capitalist industry appropriation and became a practice that reflected a communal spirit in the subculture's past.

The use of VHS remanence decay in "When It Rain" argues for the impact of the televisual on cultural history while also speculating what could have been. Media scholar Simon Reynolds had remarked, "Our cultural memories are shaped not just by the production qualities of an era […] but by subtle properties of the recording media themselves."[138] While Reynolds was referring to aural properties, such as hearing a needle drift across a vinyl record, we can use this frame to interpret the use of televisual technologies such as the videotape. Brown's own experience and memories of growing up in Detroit contains the static buzz of television and overused tapes—these artifacts have become visual markers of time. The VHS tape is now a

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[137] Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham: Duke University Press): 163.

[138] Dominik Schrey, "Analogue Nostalgia and the Aesthetics of Digital Remediation," *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future,* Eds. Katharina Neimeyer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 29.

historical artifact, and the artifact itself ages with its own visible patina: a videotape's "noise" it gains with each use transcends the object from a copy to a particular object among a mass of others (Fig. 25). An overused videotape now contains the physical inscriptions of specific events of personal experience. The marks of damage and failure in its televisual form are its unique fingerprint; against the words of Walter Benjamin, the copy gains an aura.

"When It Rain" is an aural and visual journey into Brown's origins—one that is undeniably defined by his landscape. By recreating a piece of the historical archive, "When It Rain" elevates an era of Black history to the wider discourse surrounding Detroit. The distant and eerie manifestations of past memories through technological failure illustrate how the personal is shaped by the physical: our psyche is continuously bound within technology and our environment. For Brown, Detroit is becoming less the product of human intervention as it was in the beginning of the twentieth century, as it is now in a process of becoming, one that shapes the bodies and minds within its landscape. Just as the characters of Ballard's *Drowned World* looked out to their new surroundings and decided to reveal the death of an environment as a new and different life for themselves, those left in Detroit have done the same. As the camera drifts away towards the street, the aspect ratio slowly expands into wide-screen revealing a high definition image of the scene outside (Fig. 26). We are left with Brown and his crew facing outwards in the direction of the city before them, gazing upon the landscape that continues to give them life, even after its death.

CHAPTER 5:

Conclusion

Hauntology's ghosts reach out to us from culturally distant periods of history. Through temporal gaps and cultural traces, they achieve a curious ability to criticize and reflect upon on our present. They complicate our memories, suspend our sense of time and force us to question what is real. They take shape through our collective fears about ideological futures that we have either failed to achieve or from the growing suspicions that these futures were never worth achieving at all. The political idealism and utopian aesthetic that were once celebrated in the past no longer seem valid or trustworthy in the face of our current cultural scenario. Within our present, of which suffers from a heavy weight of personal memory and cultural history, details have been omitted, histories have been carefully selected and processes of forgetting have been gradually conditioned. Derrida's hauntological deconstruction, as a "work of mourning," remains to be a praxis that allows us to identify alternate truths in the constructed chaos of our atemporal present—to recognize the paradoxes that drive our behaviors and the ghosts that continue to haunt us. The insight of these deconstructive strategies reveals how the foundations that organize our experience is created by, and created for, acts of exclusion. Everything that we know, everything that we think we know, has been defined through something it is not and has been structured to leave out the rest.

In the music videos "Ain't It Funny" and "When It Rain," Danny Brown has invited viewers into two different homes stained by Western capitalist culture: the ideal home and the broken home. These videos reference a vague timeline of the past, starting with the 1980s zeitgeist in "Ain't It Funny," and towards the eventual collapse of economic stability within

urban spaces, specifically Detroit, in "When It Rain." Curiously, these videos seem to parallel the accelerated effects of capitalism that began in the late 1980s and its subsequent deterioration of our social imagination concerning the future. Through hauntological strategy, and its inherent irony and suspicion of twentieth-century progressive ideals, Brown uses the televisual aesthetic to reveal how these homes are not what they seem by exposing the cultural knowledge within their foundations as false. As an outsider, Brown's own experience over a lifetime, through body and place, has given him the sight to see what many of us cannot. The weird and the eerie may quietly lurk out of view, but only through the experiencing of the self as the Other Brown is able to reveal the paradox of its structure and create a new one that collapses the binaries that define them. He remains ambiguous towards his status as the ghost or the haunted, but hauntology never reveals exactly who is haunting whom, and why—it is a radical acceptance that of which haunts is irresolvable and always present. Existence is inevitably haunted and simultaneously *haunting.* Hauntology and its aesthetics are unable to point us in the direction of the utopian future of which we have always dreamed of and it cannot provide any real truth—only that there is a lack thereof. Ghosts remind us that death is certain but never final. Like the past, they will always find a way to return to us.

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FIGURES

"Ain't It Funny"

Fig. 1. Danny Brown. "Ain't It Funny" (music video). 00:49. Directed by Jonah Hill. Posted 28 March 2017. Accessed 1 October 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7L4JnAuW00k

Fig. 2. Danny Brown. "Ain't It Funny" (music video). 02:20. Directed by Jonah Hill. Posted 28 March 2017. Accessed 1 October 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7L4JnAuW00k

Fig. 3. Danny Brown. "Ain't It Funny" (music video). 02:20. Directed by Jonah Hill. Posted 28 March 2017. Accessed 1 October 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7L4JnAuW00k

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