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Nostalgia in retro culture: Towards a hauntological semiotics

Master's Thesis

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I have written the Master's Thesis myself, independently. All of the other authors' texts, main viewpoints and all data from other resources have been referred to.

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Introduction

As of March 2024, Canadian pop artist The Weeknd's global hit song *Blinding Lights* from 2019 is still the most-streamed record worldwide. Its retro themes recalling 80's pop music has been widely noted by critics and listeners, and its music video on YouTube which has amassed nearly a billion plays attracts public comments¹ that confirm this status. Some comments describe it as an outright '80's vibe' song, others describe the video's protagonist as a 'mix between The Joker and Michael Jackson'. Some comments go a step further to highlight the strange nostalgic experience it produces, proposing a question echoed in sentiments around other retro-themed pop culture from electronic music genre 'vaporwave' to Netflix show *Stranger Things* (2016-x) — 'why does this song make me nostalgic for a time I didn't live in?'

This phantom nostalgia evoked through retro-themed cultural texts like *Blinding Lights*, i.e. nostalgia for a time that a subject has no lived memory of, is the focus of this thesis. Can this sort of prosthetic nostalgia really be called a nostalgia 'proper'? A description of the nostalgic experience in social and cultural discourse is captured by Turner (1987) who laid out its four dimensions —

“a sense of historical decline and loss involving a departure from some golden age of 'homefulness' [...] the absence or loss of personal wholeness and moral certainty [...] loss of individual freedom and autonomy with the disappearance of genuine social relationships [...] a loss of simplicity, personal authenticity and emotional spontaneity” (1987:150-151).

In Turner's definition, the bittersweet, melancholic affect of nostalgia is centred around a specific desired lost object, time or place, whose loss or absence from the present is mourned. Such nostalgia is for a time that was really experienced and in living memory — but as in the case of retro, the nostalgic object may be real or *imagined*.

In the case of the nostalgia evoked by 'retro' or retro-themed cultural texts, there is an absence of a clear desired referent. Aesthetic codes and symbols contemporary to bygone historic periods are

¹ The Weeknd (2020, 21 January). The Weeknd - Blinding Lights (Official Video) [Video]. YouTube. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NRXx6U8ABQ>

represented in such cultural texts that hark back to a lost time and place. But this lost imagined time is not a specifically demarcated object but instead represents a vague generic category — instead of a real lived 1980's, what is hinted at through *Blinding Lights* is a general lost feeling of '80's-ness'. Such retro is also temporally complex. Unlike in nostalgia for a childhood home for example, retro is not just past facing but often captures from history a kind of future-facing dimension borrowed from those bygone social contexts — retro in this case is thus *retrofuturistic*. This is readily apparent in the sounds and visuals of the music video for *Blinding Lights*, in which what is conjured is specific sci-fi and neo-futuristic themes that were once contemporary to the 1980's (see Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion). Thus the affective-aesthetic nostalgia evoked in the reading or consumption of retro-themed culture or 'retro' differs from the kind of nostalgia in Turner's definition, because it is both semiotically ambivalent and temporally complex.

As such, nostalgia in retro represents a new kind of nostalgia that has provoked further revisions in nostalgia studies. Chapter 1 serves as a review of the academic literature on nostalgia in retro, examining how nostalgia as defined as a melancholic effect has been analysed through sociological and political theory, critical cultural studies, media studies, marketing theory and semiotics. Sociological and critical narratives have proposed that nostalgic past-facing culture is symptomatic of a social malaise in modernity which points to a lack of faith in a progressive future, resulting in a desire for a simulated past as a resource of comfort and utopian imagination. The complex, problematic nature of retro is highlighted here in order to demonstrate the need for special conceptual apparatuses. In particular, the notion of 'hauntology' developed by Jacques Derrida (2011) has proved an effective, if experimental, analytical framework applied primarily to popular music, describing how subjects may be 'haunted' by 'spectres' of historical contexts and abandoned futures represented in a disjointed and alienated present.

Hauntology offers the conceptual tools for an aesthetic-affective understanding of the complex temporal experience of nostalgia in retro. According to such an applied framework, retro culture is involved in an aesthetic representation or 'conjuring' of 'spectres' of history. These 'spectres' are symbolic agents that represent memories of past, sometimes revolutionary eras and their experiences of social, cultural and political imagination. These spectres 'return' into the present

cultural context by becoming represented in a text that is haunted by those spectres, and these spectres act on or ‘haunt’ a subject in culture who is exposed to the spectre through reading that text. The haunting of and by the spectre is experienced as an effect of ‘traces’ of memory, experienced by a haunted subject who comes into contact with and accesses these shared memories. Hauntology can already adequately describe the affective experience of a reader or subject of a retro text, who is aware of a vague haunting by memory in culture. In this sense, we can speak of memories in culture as spectres, texts (such as retro) that (re)present them as haunted by them, the reading and experiencing subject as a haunted subject who feels the haunting effect of those spectres, and of the cultural context as a whole in which these spectres seem to proliferate as a haunted culture. However, questions remain, which can be organised in three sets:

- How does cultural memory as a haunting agent become aesthetically represented in the haunted text? How are incomplete, ambivalent and unstable traces of historical social contexts and experiences stored and recalled in cultural memory through such cultural texts?
- What is the haunting memory that is represented as a spectre in the text ‘about’? If the present cultural context itself is ‘haunted’, then what are the abandoned futures and counterfactual histories that haunt it? How do these past events and processes of cultural history remain as incomplete possibilities for future utopian change, as reflected as traces in the retro text?
- What is the affective experience of the revolutionary ‘conjuring’ of such possibilities from cultural memory that hauntology describes? What is the subjective experience of being haunted and ‘speaking-to’ ghosts, i.e. the feelings associated with an ethical praxis in real historical events experienced by a historical actor, which is then stored in cultural memory and reproduced in the nostalgic reading subject of retro?

Such questions will be the focus of each of Chapters 2, 3 and 4 respectively. In approaching these questions, hauntology’s application to retro would benefit from an adaptation in a framework that can extend between the level of cultural memory and a level of the text. A semiotics of culture is well poised here to pick up where hauntology leaves off; however, this would require a

‘reconstruction’ of Derrida’s hauntology that would be compatible with a semiotics of culture. In these terms, the affective experience of nostalgia in retro is produced in the subject or reader who can access cultural memory through the retro text. The retro text reflects the haunted nature of culture itself, by bringing into the space of the text semiotic material from those now abandoned historical eras. Retro texts thus are mnemonic texts for creative memory of past historical contexts, and they reproduce in the reading subject the experience of being haunted by this cultural memory.

This thesis is laid out in four main chapters. After a literature review of nostalgia in retro in Chapter 1, the next Chapter 2 begins our task of ‘reconstructing’ the conceptual framework of hauntology at the level of textual operations. We will first examine the basic mechanisms that define a revivalist or imitative text within a given generic canon, style or medium. But as is the main argument put forward by the critical theories on nostalgia in retro, what is being revived in these texts is not merely the formal and stylistic features of the old imitated texts but also the social contexts and futures originally attached to such historical texts that have been stored in cultural memory. This additional information about past contextual readings lays dormant in the mnemonic text of retro that reflects cultural history, but as incomplete, ambivalent and unstable fragments. In the terms of Derrida’s hauntology, these can be described as partially forgotten ‘traces’ that create an effect of ‘haunting’, which becomes represented through the arrangement of trace-elements in the space of the text. Nostalgia in retro thus involves i) the reproduction of historical textual forms and codes along with ii) a haunting memory of their original social contexts. Hence we will be able to locate how cultural memory becomes aestheticised and represented as haunting fragments or ‘traces’ in the retro text.

If in the second chapter we will have established how cultural memory exists as traces in retro texts that aestheticise their haunting effect, then in Chapter 3 we will examine what events and processes of cultural history are actually reflected in these texts. We are here concerned with what these texts are ‘about’, i.e., what memories are actually haunting through these texts. In this chapter, we will look at the larger dynamic processes and events in cultural memory and history that are reflected in the texts. Specifically, we will note that historical events of semiotic explosions that mark revolutionary zeitgeists are produced by a force of haunting by the

unrealised and abandoned possibilities from previous explosive events in history. These events are characterised by the affective experience they produce in the subject experiencing the explosion, and this affect is sedimented in traces of shared cultural memory and resurfaces in future explosions. These affective traces are those that are conjured in retro texts that reflect cultural memory, reproducing in the experiencing subject that consumes these retro texts. Thus the traces that are aesthetically represented in the retro texts are not just traces of historical original texts and codes from that generic canon, and also traces of past contextual readings stored in cultural memory, but also affective traces of past explosions in history that are reflected by these texts.

Finally in Chapter 4, we will be poised to return to the peculiar experience of nostalgia in retro that is described by hauntology. We will here revisit the logic of explosion through the hauntological framework, in order to locate the subjective experience of the haunted subject who lives and works through the explosive phase. The opening of an explosive phase in history, i.e. the revolutionary event, requires a ‘conjuring’ of ghosts, a ‘praxis’ towards a setting-right of the out-of-joint world, and a subsequent ‘exorcism’ of spectres to prevent their further returns in the newly stabilised post-revolutionary present world. The role of the retro text in this conjuring, as we will see, will be to reflect and textualise the cultural memory of the affective experience of a conjuring as traces in the text. Retro texts through aesthetic reproduction thus simulate that feeling of being haunted and open it for further interpretation, reading and consumption by future generations who may not have actually lived through that represented explosive phase.

1. A cross-disciplinary review of selected approaches to nostalgia in retro culture

In this chapter, we will briefly map out the approaches to nostalgia in ‘retro’ culture. We will begin by identifying how sociological theory has explained the prevalence of nostalgia as a ‘tonic’ to accelerating social precarity and malaise in the modern condition. These definitions are insightful into the political and social relevance of nostalgic affect, but are ill-suited to extend to retro culture. Instead, we will see through contemporary approaches that nostalgia in retro can be described as a ‘staged’, ‘simulated’ or deliberately induced nostalgia. We will then pause at the relevance of a spatiotemporal understanding of nostalgia in retro i.e. retro culture is not merely a diachronic practice of repetition of codes in an intertextual plane, but also a topographical practice of mapping and immersing in story-worlds. We will then continue to discuss the ambivalent, futural and polychronic condition of nostalgia in retro culture. We will examine how hauntology has proved to be an effective experimental conceptual framework to describe such a complex experience of retro in popular (music) culture. We will briefly examine Derrida's hauntology to see why it is appropriate for analysing the unstable semiotic mechanisms, elements and codes that are dominant in retro cultural texts. Thus, this section will allow us to demonstrate how the nostalgia in retro texts can be described as ‘haunted’.

1.1 Nostalgia as an escape from social modernity

Fred Davis’ (1979) foundational sociological analysis framed nostalgia as an effect of unsatisfactory present social conditions rather than some essential quality of the content of the time or place that is being yearned for. Thus, in modern society, the utopian tendency of nostalgia serves as an ‘outlet’ or ‘safety valve’ in response to social and individual upheaval (Davis 1979: 110). However, some aspects of Davis’ approach may seem unsuitable to our present thesis on retro culture. In his opening preface, Davis distinguishes his object of study as the ‘general’ conditions that evoke nostalgia, as distinct from a semiotic (form or content) analysis of particular nostalgic manifestation in the realm of mass communication. Then, Davis clarifies that his ‘nostalgia’ is not a ‘nostalgia for the future’, or what is typically referred to as an ‘anticipatory nostalgia’ in cultural psychology where we can miss an imagined past from a position of a projected future. Davis argues that nostalgia does not have any hidden facility to “feel forward in time” in a similar way as it “feels backward” (1979: 12-13). Most damningly, Davis also

distinguishes nostalgia as a feeling resulting from a minimum of real personal concrete memory, rather than a general “antiquarian feeling” which has more licence for reconstructive imagination and thus is not held back by the constraints of concrete memory and history which are present in nostalgia (ibid.: 8-9). Hence, unlike in this simulative antiquarian feeling (which is aligned with the experience of nostalgia in retro), the bittersweet “virtue and pathos of nostalgia; it can only draw from the meagre materials of one’s own past existence [...] it cannot fabricate out of whole cloth the person, the scene, or the event that never was” (ibid.: 47). This last point seemingly already precludes our choice of the term ‘nostalgia’, and serves as a good starting point for us to start out seeking definitions of nostalgia that are more relevant to retro.

Subsequent definitions are perhaps more forgiving to our needs. Importantly, a detachment of nostalgia from the ‘constraining’ substance of personal memory, allowing it to be framed in terms of a shared cultural yearning for an imagined home. Another classic on this topic is Svetlana Boym’s (2001) history and analysis of modern nostalgia which has been widely influential on fields ranging from social theory (see Bauman 2017) to consumer and marketing studies (see Brown, Kozinets & Sherry 2003). In Boym’s terms, nostalgia is a melancholic mourning, “a sentiment of loss and displacement” from and a “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (Boym 2001: xiii). The nostalgic object is ambivalent, vague and elusive because nostalgia as a process is also “a romance with one’s own fantasy” (ibid.). Contemporary nostalgia also emerges from the particular temporal regime of modernity. If “the twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia” (ibid.: xiv) then today’s cultural affliction is a mourning for and yearning for an impossible return to a lost enchanted world. Modern nostalgia emerges as an effect of and an antidote to accelerating modernisation and a ‘teleology of progress’ which globalises a rational and legible worldview that bifurcates notions of the ‘universal’ and the ‘local’. This is why “nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, *to revisit time like space*, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition” (Boym 2001.: xv). Nostalgia is “not merely an individual sickness but a symptom of our [modern] age” (ibid.: xvi). It is also never merely personal but “is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (ibid.). Nostalgic desire is utopian — but the better

time and place yearned for is not in the future but usually in some imagined past. But the nostalgic gaze may also be ‘sideways’, because the utopian object is located in “the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that became obsolete” (ibid.: xiii-xv). Boym contributes here with a typology of modern nostalgia, inspired by Davis (1979). The home that is yearned for may be represented in absolute terms as a true, traditional and positive space to be restored, as in ‘restorative’ nostalgia as practised in national imagination and discourse. Or nostalgia’s object may be more elusive, ambivalent and contradictory, accessed through a transhistorical reconstruction of an object that is always seductively and ironically beyond our grasp, as in a critical reflexive nostalgia that is more about individual and cultural memory. Boym’s latter type of nostalgia in particular offers a closer description to the affective condition of retro culture that we are interested in. Her notion of ‘sideways’ gaze is also relevant for our scope, as the desired object is not located in some actually lived past but in foregone, counterfactual futures parallel to the present, arising from projected possibilities of what-could-have-been; we will later see that this framework coincides well with the way Derrida’s (2011) hauntology has been developed to discuss the effect of counterfactual futures on the experience of lived presence.

Nostalgia as a peculiarly modern affliction that has co-evolved with modern notions of progress has also been looked at by Aleida Assmann (2013, see also 2020). The economic rationale of ‘creative destruction’ invents the ‘historical’ as an ‘other,’ i.e., an object of study and creative resource to be discarded in production. However, the acceleration of media and communications technology, social, economic and political precarity, and an increasingly fast-paced everyday life, means the modern time regime “is accompanied by a sense of loss, producing a crisis of experience that is a notorious by-product of the modern time regime” (2013: 50). Acceleration of the modern time regime requires a healing compensation —

“humans develop and cherish a culture of preservation and memory in order to compensate for the frustrations of the modern world of progress [...] The more the still visible past of our built environment is devalued, discarded and destroyed, the more likely the pendulum is to swing into the opposite direction: What modernists condemned to oblivion and singled out for destruction is now revalued and cherished.” (ibid.: 51-52).

Further, there is the problematisation of the historical experience of the ‘other’ that has been the subject of trauma and repression by the modern regime has produced a new ‘politics of regret’. Thus, history and heritage as emotional refuge and resource of social moral accountability have resulted in a notion of *reversibility* of time —

“the past has not automatically vanished or been transferred into the aseptic realm of historical scholarship. On the contrary, it is recovered, reconstructed and reconnected to the present by various emotional, moral or legal ties as a response to past grievances and a form of taking responsibility” (ibid.: 53).

Assmann’s (2013) analysis succinctly captures how the past leaves traces in the present and history has become the domain of cultural, moral and political polemics and policy. However, for retro aesthetic culture which does not reference specific objects but rather conjures a vague notion of ‘pastness’ (for example, a general ‘80’s’ theme), this analysis falls short. Instead, as we will see later, we are dealing with a reversal of the direction of such nostalgia — in retro culture, the present appears to be projected into the past.

Nostalgia is obviously relevant in the political realm, instrumentalised by different groups and programs. In a recent edit journal volume surveying cross-disciplinary approaches to nostalgia, Jacobsen (2020) proposes to distinguish ‘non-political’ or ‘phenomenological’/‘existential’ nostalgia from ‘political’ or ‘ideological’ nostalgia which is deliberately deployed “by powerful groups in society playing on creating a collective emotional effervescence (Émile Durkheim’s term) or a ‘social stir’ that can lead to desired social changes” (Jacobsen 2020: 12). The general scholarly consensus is that nostalgia is “something that paints an unnecessarily bleak picture of the present, something that is pointing backwards instead of showing the way ahead, and something threatening the ideas of an open, multicultural, globalised and liberal-democratic society.” (ibid.: 16). This is why “the longing for the past within contemporary politically correct politics is mostly regarded [...] as a passive, regressive and reactionary kind of sentimentalism without any critical sensibility.” (ibid.: 17). Of course, the regressive or progressive quality of nostalgia does not emerge from its essential or substantial ‘content’ but from the contingencies of its use in particular social relations, goals and futures. Nadkarni and Schevchenko (2004) have shown through comparative political analysis of post-socialist nostalgic cultural practices that the

apparent polar typologies (“restorative” vs “reflective”, “Good” vs. “Bad” nostalgia) are context-driven. This is why “similar practices, inspired by similar sets of longings, can thus follow very different political trajectories” (Nadkarni, Schevchenko 2004: 490). Therefore, ideological content analyses of nostalgia and retro should take into account their particular present-day interpersonal, political and historical relations that determine particular nostalgic discourses and texts. However, with regards to the question of why young people today desire a past and its imagined future that they themselves have no concrete personal memory of, Nadkarni and Schevchenko describe a “nostalgia of style” such as that in retro themes as a “nostalgia without a referent and hence without pain” (ibid.: 503). In this definition of nostalgia that relies on personal, ‘concrete’ memory, they fall foul of a thinking similar to Davis’ (1979) restrictive definition that does not take into account the trans-generational and diffused nature of nostalgic remembrance. In fact, as we will see, nostalgia without referent is not stripped of affective power but instead requires a reversal in analytical positioning. Also, today’s contemporary nostalgia is increasingly diffused in consumer culture rather than operationalised solely by politically-oriented groups and actors. As has been noted by Esra Özyürek (2006), the re-appropriation of symbols from past historical eras such as those preceding neoliberalism in nostalgic culture is instrumental for (neoliberal) hegemony that relies on a “privatisation of the political”. This privatised, distributed nature makes the distinguishing of ‘nostalgia proper’ from a ‘nostalgia of style’ problematic and complex.

It would seem we are no closer to an analysis of nostalgia in retro. The above analyses offer valuable insights at a meta level of social and historical reality, but do not offer an explanation for how nostalgia traverses to the micro level of particular texts, commodities or discourses. Also, there remains the tendency to discount the affective experience of nostalgia in retro culture, i.e., this practice of distinguishing ‘proper nostalgia’ from such a ‘nostalgia without pain or referent’ is already problematic. Most importantly, sociological and political definitions of nostalgia tend to focus on its narrow use in discourse about a return to an imagined past. In retro there is no clearly indicated ‘better times’ located in history that is desired. In search of approaches to retro

through the lens of nostalgia, we can turn to fields such as media, advertising and marketing studies, to which semiotics is already closely related.

1.2 Retro as aesthetic or ‘staged’ nostalgia without referent

The 2014 edited journal volume ‘Media and Nostalgia’ contributes to a gap in understanding the relation of media with the current ‘nostalgia boom’ and in particular the mediated nature of nostalgic emotion when examining specific media cultural artefacts, aesthetics, forms and narratives, etc. As Katharina Niemeyer writes in the Introduction —

“media produce contents and narratives not only in the nostalgic style but also as triggers of nostalgia. Media, and new technologies in particular, can function as platforms, projection places and tools to express nostalgia. Furthermore, media are very often nostalgic for themselves, their own past, their structures and contents.” (2014: 7).

Already in the introduction, there is a hint towards a more careful investigation of what she terms ‘false nostalgia’ — “a pleasure-seeking yearning for former times that we have not, in fact, lived” in which there is more emphasis on an artificially constructed longing and less on accurate revivalism of outdated modes and forms (ibid.:9).

Bartholeyns’ (2014) contribution to this volume examines this kind of nostalgia that we are interested in. Objects like ‘visual vintage’ aesthetics in retro-style photography show that something like nostalgia is produced even among younger perceivers — “the last analogue generation may drive the market and cultivate the myth, but it is evident that most users are, in fact, digital natives.” (ibid.: 54). This nostalgia is ‘exogenous’, and unlike the ‘Proustian’ nostalgia that has been described before, this nostalgia is deliberately ‘conjured’ and ‘self-induced’ through specific ‘aesthetic modalities’ (ibid.: 55). Although close to Boym’s (2001) ‘reflexive nostalgia’, this new nostalgia —

“is staged but it has no referent. It is not based on anything that came before. Rather, it is generated in a bid to render the present more poignant. This is achieved through the added

emotional value provided by a temporal distance that is made visible by a dated aesthetic and by passing off photographs as older than they are” (Bartholeyns 2014: 60).

If in classic nostalgia the emotion is produced by a distance between the object ‘that-has-been’ and that is represented in the photograph, then in this case the emotion —

“stems, instead, from the visual contamination of the subject photographed. Nostalgia used to depend on the denial of access to the subject, on its unreachable presence. Now, there is an effective formula to encourage nostalgia. The cult of the referent is being replaced by the cult of the reference, reference to an iconography that, in its form, is typical of memory. The indexical nature of photography is giving way to the power of fantasy.” (ibid.: 65).

Bartholeyns (2014) captures well how such retro cultural nostalgia requires a new approach — unlike in previously mentioned analyses such as in Assmann’s (2013) dimension of the historical, “it is no longer the past that is injected into the present but the present that is projected back into the past. The contemporary is being destroyed for the sake of a more intimate, less impersonal perception” (Bartholeyns 2014: 66). This reframing of the past as no longer as a real place or time but as a generic category or aesthetic modality with which to ‘contaminate’ the present is crucial to a new approach to retro culture. Further, the reason that pastness has become a mode of marketing and advertising has all the more to do with advances in communicative technology and the proliferation of consumptive media, an aspect which cannot be separated from the affective dimension of nostalgia itself.

In marketing and advertising studies, nostalgia is similarly given a larger purview. This area focuses on associated trends like retromarketing, vintage, nostalgia and melancholia which have been extensively written on. Hietanen, Ahlberg and Soila (2021) provide an overview of the field’s approach to retro as overlapping with but separate from nostalgia. Retro is analytically distinct “from other fascinations with the old. A shiny, off-the-conveyer-belt retro-commodity never occupied its past but rather is its pure simulation, a commoditized resemblance that can gesture toward the past in various ways and readily recombine these aesthetics in a bricolage fashion” (ibid.: 4-5). Brown (1999), for example, laid down a typology of retro-commodities, namely — ‘repro’ (reproducing the old similar to or as it was as an ‘authentic replica’, ‘inspired

by’, ‘reminiscent of’, or in ‘contemporary interpretations’ of originals), ‘retro’ (a combining of the old with the new, usually with old formal aesthetics with new hi-tech technology) and repro-retro (reviving something that was originally nostalgic for something else to begin with) (ibid.: 365-366). At the level of meta narratives, retromarketing theory aligns with sociological explanations for the ‘nostalgia boom’, in that retro aesthetics “offered both novel expressions and experiences in the postmodern era but also somehow pointed to an absence of both stability and the belief in a secure future that was previously promised by the union of liberal democracy and capitalism” (Hietanen et al. 2021: 2). Retromarketing theory starkly contrasts with the pessimism towards nostalgia in political studies and has “tended to focus on three things: the emergence of retro, vintage, and nostalgia as predominantly affirmatory, meaningful, and comforting consumption of the past” (ibid.: 5). This pragmatic approach reflects the utopianism in normative marketing theory which “generally maintains a view of consumer experience as a meaningful and enticing sense of accomplishment in their pursuits to possess and encounter the commodified old” (ibid.: 2). However, such an optimistic view alone is insufficient and does not take into account the bittersweet nature of nostalgia — which is why theories in this field have left the “ambiguous and affective nature (of nostalgia) largely elusive and uncharted” (ibid.: 4). As an attempt to theorize on this ‘darker’ side of retro’s ambivalence, Hietanen et al. explain “retro consumption as a far more desperate desiring impulse — a largely unconscious attempt to reinsert a sense of history in culture that has largely occluded it, to invoke any depth in history” (2021:11). This simulative nature is why—

“retro, in contrast to vintage and personal nostalgic objects which retain some indexicality to their historical context, plucks artefacts from history and strips them bare of all their problematic de facto historical context [...] turning them into zombified spectacles as part of the marketized myth of commodified authenticity.” (ibid.: 7).

Hietanen et al. (2021) develop their approach with inspiration from Jacques Derrida’s (1994) notion of ‘hauntology’. As they write —

“the very form of retro thus becomes spectral [...] all the more haunting as it emerges through fantasy [...] Retro, as an “absent aesthetic,” [...] is not a meaningfully representational consumer experience but instead denotes an affective excess of meaning

[...] that consumers desperately cling to; temporal pieces of flotsam offering glimpses of past futures.” (Hietanen et al. 2021:12).

Their approach to retro coincides well with the existing sociological interpretation of nostalgia, and adds a dimension of simulation and spectacularisation of the desired object. Further, their deployment of hauntology as an analytical framework exemplifies its potential in a particular critical tradition examining the ambivalence of retro and nostalgia, as we will see later.

1.3 Nostalgia as tourism

Topographical vocabularies describing nostalgia, as with Boym’s (2001: xv) ‘revisiting of space like time’, are implicit in all hitherto analyses.

Bauman (1996) captures how in postmodernity, instead of identity being a fixed location in which subjects are defined, there increasingly is a logic of tourism in the formation of identity in popular culture in general. Instead of the logic of the ‘pilgrim’ who yearns for an escape from identity and stability (Bauman 1996: 19), the tourist seeks an immersion in ‘strange and bizarre’ elements and worlds — “the tourist’s world is fully and exclusively structured by aesthetic criteria” (ibid.: 29-30). The spatiotemporal nature of nostalgia is fundamental to the tourist’s nostalgic gaze, which always desires an enclosed, delimited space within which to trap the affectively-laden signs of authenticity. As Kathleen Stewart puts it, the nostalgic experience is designed to produce a feeling of interiority and authenticity in “the space and time of the individual perceiving subject. But in the process they also exaggerate the enclosure of ‘style’ so that these interiors are not just sanctuaries but also prisons” (Stewart 1988: 230). This is why ‘fantasy environments’ in public spaces involve the production of space as “a rationalized, universalized surface” , on which it is possible to “appropriate, preserve, rearrange, collect, and reproduce ‘history’ as a symbolic enclosure embodied in handsome, well-kept —a ‘history’ exempted from the ravages, and freedoms, of history” (ibid.:232). It is this preserved historical space which becomes a destination for tourism. Nostalgia plays a constitutive role in the logic of tourism discussed by Frow (1991), in which nostalgia is a desperate yearning for authenticity but which does not reference a real object, instead simulating a desired place characterised by immediacy and presence. As a repetitive form, it mourns the inauthenticity of repetition itself and “the decline from use value to commodity, from immanence to instrumentality, from the

observing traveller to the possessive tourist, and from the world as being to the world as simulacrum.” (Frow 1991.: 142).

Thus nostalgia in retro culture involves not merely a diachronic repetition of generic codes and signs in an intertextual plane, but also a topographical mapping and immersing in story-worlds. Such a spatial understanding of the nostalgic object , represented in and accessed through a story-world, will aid our later description of retro as a cultural text.

1.4 Ambivalence, polychronicity and utopian dimensions of nostalgia

Nostalgia is not always negative, regressive or backwards-facing. The experience has always been recognised to be marked by a “semantic vagueness, drift, and ambiguity” and an ‘incorporeality of referent’ (Davis 1979: 7). This polyvalence and ambiguity of nostalgia also contains its productive and radical potential rather than making it univocally reactionary or conservative — as Tannock argues, “if the nostalgic retreat always comprises both critique and alternative, then these officially sanctioned spaces [of nostalgia] may well, at certain points in history, provide sites, materials, and inspiration for meaningful social change” (1995: 459). This imaginative and anticipatory potential of haunting to ‘feel forward’ which is excluded in Davis’ (1979) initial definition of nostalgia is of special interest to us when examining cultural nostalgia in retro.

Indicatively, Massimo Leone (2015) extends Frow’s (1991) notion of ‘temporal tourism’ further to demonstrate how the utopianism of previous countercultural movements gets represented in retro cultural nostalgia. It is important to note how Leone points to the more expansive nature of retro and vintage as compared to earlier analyses of nostalgia. Davis’ (1979) exclusionary definition echoes in Umberto Eco’s analysis of vintage and retro consumption as ‘merely’ fashion, which is critiqued by Leone (2015) for missing an existential aspect of nostalgia. Leone instead proposes that when European youths today purchase vintage furniture that was contemporary in the 1960's, what they are purchasing is an imagined future of ‘hopeful expectation, vibrant incertitude, and energetic élan’ that was contemporary to the times in which those objects were originally popular. These objects represent a 'vicarious shadow' of their grandparents' experience of social, cultural and political stability, momentum and futural thinking that has all but disappeared today. As Leone puts it, "a 1950s' Brown radio meant existential

progress to come when it was bought in the 1950s. Today, it sadly means nostalgia for that feeling of existential progress to come" (ibid.: 12).

An expansive view of nostalgia that takes into account its paradoxical composition and progressive, constructive and radical potential has been accepted across sociological, cultural and political theory. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, writes in his volume 'Retrotopia' (2017), that in the 21st century, the future has degenerated from "habitat of hopes and rightful expectations into the site of nightmares" (Bauman 2017: 10) and in response, we have now entered into an 'age of nostalgia'. Interestingly, Bauman's notion of retrotopia is more ontologically mobile and perhaps optimistic than classic analyses. Retrotopia offers an ontological 'universal ground' that has been lost in post-positivism, which may "guarantee an acceptable modicum of stability and therefore a satisfactory degree of self-assurance" (ibid.). But it also incorporates the post-positivist

"replacement of the 'ultimate perfection' idea with the assumption of the non-finality and endemic dynamism of the order it promotes, allowing thereby for the possibility (as well as desirability) of an indefinite succession of further changes that such an idea a priori de-legitimizes and precludes. True to the utopian spirit, retrotopia derives its stimulus from the hope of reconciling, at long last, security with freedom: the feat that both the original vision and its first negation didn't try – or, having attempted, failed – to attain" (Bauman 2017: 11).

Modern nostalgia in retro is thus characterised by an ambivalent paradoxical incorporation; this is the 'both-and' logic of the spectre of a world that could be free (Herbert Marcuse, n.d.).

An insightful contribution that has expanded the notion of nostalgia to include a futural dimension has been found in social psychology — as far back as Nawas and Platt's (1965) notion of a future-oriented nostalgia involves notions of anticipation, aspirations, goal-oriented motivation and informs the identity of the subject. Elsewhere, Smith and Campbell (2017) contrasted conservative and 'regressive' yearning for better days to return to with 'progressive nostalgia' which stems from a constructive acknowledging and acceptance of the past as a "a point from which to 'carry on', and to make a new and improved future [...]" (2017: 12). In this way, history affords "a sense of belonging and appreciation of social or geographical 'place', which enables both an affirmation and an assertion of contemporary social and political

aspirations” (2017:12). This temporal complexity and irreducibility of nostalgia in retro is also touched on by Farrar (2011) who similarly points out that in the discourse and formal construction of history and memory in public places, a critical mode of acknowledging and inculcating the ‘haunted’ nature of temporally ‘porous’ and polychronic places offers an alternative to the ideological polarity of ‘amnesiac’ placelessness versus fetishistic preservation and gentrification.

1.5 Retro cultural texts as meta cultural texts reflecting cultural history

Nostalgia in retro can be positioned as a ‘meta cultural’ ontological experience. In textual and aesthetic practice, nostalgia reflects on alienated subjectivities and conditions of history, presence, and authenticity. As Boym (2001) has noted, nostalgia is not a simple desire for a lost object, in psychoanalytical terms, but is instead a ‘longing for longing’ — it includes within its object a position of authentic relation to the imagined desired object.

Nostalgia is fundamentally a self— reflective emotion. According to Turner’s (1987) definition, it is possible to speak of an “ontology of nostalgia as a fundamental condition of human estrangement” and alienation from “both the natural and social world” due to people’s perceived distance from their material environment because of the capacity for self-reflection on “their finite conditions as beings-unto-death” (ibid.: 150). Thus, nostalgia can be called a *meta-cultural phenomenon* due to its characteristic self-reflexivity. It looks back on and desires a return to a certain phase in social cultural history. The nostalgic subjective position includes within it *self-awareness* of the polychronicity and ‘textuality of the past’ (Grainge 2000) —

“Retro is not a mark of cultural amnesia or creative bankruptcy, but a way of acknowledging that the past exists through *textual traces* in cultural and ideological mediation with the present [...] retro need not entail memory crisis, but can suggest an *increasing semiotic awareness of the textuality of the past.*” (Grainge 2000: 29, italics added).

Nostalgia and retro as a cultural style “cannot be explained through any single master narrative of decline, crisis, longing, or loss”, but instead “has developed in accordance with a series of

cultural, demographic, technological, and commercial factors that have made ‘pastness’ an expedient and marketable mode.” This is why “the proliferation of nostalgic modes, markets, genres, and styles may instead reflect a new kind of engagement with the past, a relationship based fundamentally on its cultural mediation and textual reconfiguration in the present” (ibid.: 32-33). Thus retro culture involves a complex recombination of *traces* of history, and its nostalgia is neither positive nor negative due to any essential reflexive or reconstructive quality. The loss of a referent and its simulation does not amount to a ‘lack of meaning’ but is simply a dynamic artistic form that recombines historical aesthetic codes and opens them to new creative interpretations. This optimistic sentiment is emblemized by Galvin (2020) in analysis of ‘hypernostalgia’, which concerns simulative nostalgia through trends of recent music cassette tape revivalism mediated by films, music and television shows. As they write critiquing Simon Reynolds’ (2011) notion of ‘retromania’ (discussed below) which claims that we are running out of a past to remake, “these texts and paratexts show how ‘new’ and ‘old’ media, along with the related popular cultural forms of the media’s time, are combining in ‘new’ ways” (ibid.: 204) in a ‘post-digital space’ that transcends the ideological boundaries between analogue and digital. This is why

“Millennials and Generation Z can also experience the cassette in the time of their youth, not so much as anachronism, but as active temporal and media preference, which can [...] afford an opportunity to reclaim youth subcultural identity, and senses of cultural ownership, belonging, and self-worth” (ibid.: 204-205).

However, the question still remains regarding if retro culture really is such a ‘nostalgia without pain’. We will argue to the contrary, beginning first with Hietanen, Ahlberg & Soila’s claim of retro as ‘an affective excess of meaning’ (2021: 12). In their terms, retro seductively produces its own desire while seemingly making its attainment impossible. We can already see how a psychoanalytical approach may benefit us here, in that it conceptualises the constitutive impossibility of (nostalgic) desire and the projected imagination or fantasy of its object. In a recent paper on the nostalgia for analog aesthetics in popular TV series *Stranger Things*, Louis-Paul Willis argues that through remediation of the represented analog media and artefacts from the 1980s, a nostalgia for a time and place never lived through is produced through the

desired object's opposition to digital media. Proceeding from a psychoanalytical tradition applied to film and media studies, Willis argues that the desire for the now obsolete cultures and objects represented in the show (like Walkman cassettes, for example) is produced exactly through its perceived distance from the subject: "the digital remediation of analog media in the show is reflective insofar as it highlights the passing of time as well as the unattainability of the artifacts from the past." (2022: 10). Willis locates this imagined nostalgia as a "result of the subject's projection of his or her desire onto the object and the surplus that emanates from such a projection, the quality of being "analog" is something that is projected as a surplus onto a given technological media or artefact. And just as it is the case with the objet *a*, analog is something that is lost, but which did not exist — at least not in its current conception — prior to being lost." (2022: 12). Analog is thus defined as a signifier in retrospect and acts as a 'vector' for the desire that is projected onto the object. The signifier of analog is 'floating', polysemic and polychronic.

Nostalgia in retro is complex and multidimensional, with conflicting temporalities ('backwards' as well as 'forwards') represented in and evoked by the text. Nostalgia in retro is ambivalent and involves a certain elusive quality and absence of clear referent. Derrida's (2011) metaphor of the spectre and its haunting is well-suited as an analytical tool to approach this complex nature of nostalgia in retro. Crucially, the spectre as a sign of haunting is not univocal or stable but ambivalent. Unlike nostalgia in which the past is 'reinserted into the present', haunting retains its possibility for radically new futures and interpretations as a call to action and justice.

1.6 Haunted nostalgia in retrofuturism

Hauntology is a theoretical modality and methodological repertoire that allows analysis of such an aesthetic ontology of feeling 'haunted' in the present by abandoned, repressed or malevolent ideological histories and futures (real or *imagined*). Hauntology, as we will see, is well suited as a conceptual framework to describe the polychronic, ambivalent and unstable affective experience of nostalgia in retro culture.

Applied to contemporary cultural critique, hauntology as an aesthetic and critical practice reveals the 'spectres' of abandoned futures of unrealised (cultural and historical) possibilities that return

into the present, conjured by aesthetic and narrative codes. According to many critics there is an increasing pathological preoccupation with the haunting quality of these abandoned futures in the present contemporary social and cultural moment. This is exemplified in music criticism by Reynolds' (2011) discussion of 'retromania', or by Mark Fisher's 'sonic hauntology'. According to this school of thought, contemporary popular music culture is engaged in a melancholic "retreat from the modernist challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience" (Fisher 2014: 21) through an attachment to "materialised memory" (2014: 29) and revivalist reproduction of artistic forms from the late 20th century. The formal nostalgia of retro pop artists is read by Fisher (2014) through the lens of Jameson's 'nostalgia mode' (2005) which is an aestheticised anachronism in cultural texts that sound or feels historical enough to pass off as historical themselves. In Fisher's example, the spectres that haunt in Western popular music are the spectres of adjacent futures that could-have-been proceeding from social processes of cultural and political upheaval of the late 60's and 70's in Western Europe. As writer Mark Kurlansky (2010) notes, a watershed moment in global history was the revolutionary atmosphere spurred by French student riots in 1968, which became an 'epicentre' of fundamental changes in cultural and political imaginaries and zeitgeists across Western Europe and the United States. The 1970's and 1980's saw the defusing of such revolutionary fervour with global breaking of unions, austerity measures and what is generally termed economic and political 'neoliberalism' of the Reagan and Thatcher regimes. This affective atmosphere of a global order on the precipice of radical political and economic change (for better or worse) was concomitant with advances in visual and audio media technologies resulting in, for example, cultural advances in popular music in genres like psychedelic rock in the 1960's and 1970's, or innovative electronic music genres in the 1970's, 80's and 90's in the UK, Europe and the United States. This zeitgeist of revolutionary cultural change beginning in the 1960's in 'the West' was continually re-presented and reflected on in the following decades through various movements of pastiche, parody and homage that appropriated those earlier aesthetic forms. In the 21st century, now long 'dead', this is zombified in popular music. Today, exemplified by music from artists like Adele, The Killers, Oasis, Arctic Monkeys, Amy Winehouse or Taylor Swift,² who draw heavily from retro production styles. The

² Fisher later adds to this list examples of 'party hauntology', referring to "the dominant 21st century form of pop, the transnational club music produced by Guetta, Flo-Rida, Calvin Harris and will.i.am." (Fisher, 2014: 163)

synthetic texture of 21st century audio production is *layered* with the ‘classic’ qualities of music from the past, and the result is retro-simulative music that belongs to “some implied ‘timeless’ era, an eternal 1960s or an eternal 80s” (Fisher 2014: 18).

This analysis of ‘retromania’ is similar to previous sociological polemics on the regressive social function of nostalgia. However, Fisher and others speculate on the *retrofuturistic* function of retro. The nostalgia in retro is nostalgia not for a return to those earlier *zeitgeists* but for the experience of utopian imagination contemporary to those times. These arise from adjacent futures that could-have-been, representing the abandoned ‘popular modernist’ promises of economic equity, social humanitarianism and cultural and technological innovation of the 20th century that collapsed with the totalizing regimes of neoliberal global capital. It is these social and political futures that are attached to the cultural forms to which they were contemporary. With retro-pastiche pop music, the past is a resource of nostalgic comfort, and is mined for alternatives to the present disjointed world. The effect, and the task, of the nostalgia mode is to refurbish the old and thereby *disguise the disappearance of the future as its coming* (its return) (Fisher 2014: 19.). Thus ‘retro-mania’ is a symptom of the contemporary condition of a lack of cultural innovation, radical potentiality of the present or any sense of momentum of historical processes. It is only due to our feeling of a ‘slow cancellation of the future’ that we resort to comfort in the past as a source of narrative and aesthetic inspiration.

Fisher proposes a distinction between retro-pastiche cultural texts, *contra* those that critically subvert this dominant nostalgic mode. The former, i.e. retro pop music harvests the futuristic aesthetic from history, but this is solely a reproduction of form — it culls out the content and context so as to liberate it from the responsibility of teleology and becoming. This ‘dyschronia’ has become naturalised into the banal absurdity of the everyday in postmodern capitalism — “anachronism is now taken for granted” and has lost its uncanny charge (Fisher 2014: 23). On the other hand, there is a difference here between this “no longer” existing social democratic modernism that we may mourn melancholically in nostalgia and the “not yet” of the futures that did not materialise (*ibid.*: 34) which are revealed through hauntology. For Fisher, ‘hauntological music’ from genres like experimental pop and electronic music critically expose the haunted nature of retro culture through the use of elements like vinyl crackles, video glitches, etc. So,

spectres revealed by artistic hauntology, despite being ‘commodified’ and de-radicalised in ‘retro-pastiche’ cultural texts, remain spectres of possible radical innovation and cultural, political and social imaginaries. Hauntology as an aesthetic proactive aesthetic exposes nostalgia to social critique. This is why —

“in hauntological music there is an implicit acknowledgement that the hopes created by postwar electronica or by the euphoric dance music of the 1990s have evaporated – not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible. Yet at the same time, the music constitutes a refusal to give up on the desire for the future. This refusal gives the melancholia a political dimension, because it amounts to a failure to accommodate to the closed horizons of capitalist realism” (Fisher 2014: 29).

In Fisher’s hands, hauntological art and practice becomes the critical and subversive counter-mechanism to nostalgia, thus extending the restorative / reflective typology offered by Boym (2001). Hauntology is applied effectively by Fisher both as a theoretical procedure and also as a way to describe aesthetic and critical practices that reflect on the haunted nature of nostalgic texts.

Our understanding of the haunted nature of culture provides us with a clearer view of how in the case of retro, cultural trauma of unfulfilled futures are conjured deliberately as spectres into the present, signified as ghosts of that which could-have-been. The futural and ambivalent function of nostalgia in retro is adequately captured by the conceptual framework of hauntology. If we re-examine Fisher’s opposition of nostalgic and hauntological texts, we can conclude that both types of retro texts are fundamentally concerned with their own haunted nature and that of the society they reflect. In the first, the spectre is appropriated and stabilised, while in the second the violent incursion of the spectre and the instability of presence and history is exposed.

Thus, despite the deployment of hauntology in pessimistic meta narratives about the regressive role of nostalgia in times of cultural stagnation and communicative acceleration, we may still imagine a more productive and emancipatory haunting. In this sense, we could possibly detach the dimension of haunting as a theoretical position from critiques that a priori assume the compensatory function of nostalgia in times of social malaise. That is, we should not confuse the polemic ‘content’ of haunting from its aesthetic conjuring. Thus the seeming opposition of

hauntology contra nostalgia (or restorative/reflective, ‘Good’/’Bad’, etc.) is not a clear-cut distinction. Eventually, the content of haunting is determined by contingent subjective position — who sees and ‘speaks-to’ the spectre, and how the spectre’s injunctions are received and mobilised.

As we will expand on in chapter 2, hauntology offers appropriately flexible meta language for the analysis of temporally complex semiotic processes in cultural texts. Haunting allows us to describe this affective condition resulting from unstable and conflicting (spatio)temporalities. This affective condition of being haunted has been aestheticised in the postmodern era, represented in objects, commodities, texts and discourse to be contextualised in different directions for progressive or regressive, reflective or restorative nostalgia — as objects of desire or as tools for political mobilisation. We have established that retro is an aesthetic representation of the condition of being haunted, i.e. it conjures a certain feeling of historical social and cultural contexts through specific generic historic conventions and codes. The concept of ‘haunting’ by alternative futures which act on us through a ‘sideways gaze’, allows us to describe the experience of the present time as fundamentally split, alienated from itself and from the subject.

In this chapter, we first introduced nostalgia as a label for a broad range of discursive or aesthetic strategies that have social and political relevance. The prescriptive sociological meta narratives put forward to diagnose nostalgia as a symptom of social malaise, dysfunction and stagnation have been reflected across disciplines from different positions. However, a given nostalgic manifestation cannot be *a priori* regressive or progressive, but instead depends on the particular contingent social relations and discourse that it is deployed for. Modern retro cultural texts have been analysed to be complex — so nostalgia as an analytical category has also expanded and evolved far beyond its original constraints such as concretised personal memory. Hence analyses of nostalgia in retro, vintage and other associated trends have grappled with these tendencies of modern mediatised and commercialised nostalgia — its bittersweet *ambivalence* of affect; its *fantastical*, simulative or inauthentic nature, its *polychronic* temporalities due to its futural and utopian dimension; its *meta cultural* function reflecting cultural history; its fundamental

spatiotemporal construction. We have also briefly examined the notion of hauntology as applied to nostalgia in retro, and which will serve as a primary theoretical position for us to develop in conjunction and dialogue with semiotic frameworks in the next chapters.

2. Textual operations in haunted retro texts

In this chapter, we will take seriously the notion of the ‘textuality of the past’ that is conjured through ‘traces’ in retro (Grainge 2000). We can begin by clarifying our definition of retro culture as a particular generic space and tradition, involving the imitation of previous codes and texts in that generic space. However retro also involves some additional information about the bygone historical contexts, which allows the consumers or readers of these retro texts to access shared cultural memories that predate their own experience. This can be described as an ‘unconscious’ affective excess, as noted by Hietanen et. al. (2021). This brings us to the question: how can texts today retrieve cultural memories of old social contexts through the imitation of old aesthetic codes and texts?

In this chapter, we will examine retro as a formation of cultural texts, i.e. an imitative reproduction or revival of texts within a generic tradition established in bygone moments of cultural history. We will examine this process of (meta) textual generation with the theoretical background provided by a semiotics of translation. We will then continue to the question of how texts store, recall and creatively interpret the past social contexts and futures contemporary to their historical production and interpretations through fragments or ‘traces’. Exploring this ‘memory’ of the cultural text, we will return to questions of haunting in texts at the level of the unstable signs and elements represented in retro texts.

2.1 Retro culture as intertextual or meta textual translation

Retro-themed cultural texts are never an exact copy but borrow certain elements and codes from historical texts, although their reference to specific old source texts within the given canon may be more or less readily apparent. In this sense, nostalgic imitation in retro can be construed as a translation of old textual elements, forms, styles, and codes, from one historic cultural context to another. Continuing with this framework, we can first turn to the theory of 'total translation' put forward by Peeter Torop (2000) in which culture is viewed as an aggregated generative mechanism of creative translation of texts.

Instead of examining a text in isolation, we are concerned with the multi-level linkages that connect the present text to the codes, texts, devices, etc. that characterise a certain generic space. This dimension that interests us has been termed as the intertextual dimension of translation between texts (Torop 2000: 75-81). The advantage of the intertextual dimension is that in analysis it reveals the conventional principles of text construction within a certain genre or canon (ibid.: 78); thus it is appropriate to apply the notion of intertextuality to the study of textual production within the generic space of retro culture. Further, in the case of texts for which a single explicit source text may be 'concealed' or not readily apparent, or which may borrow from a range of source texts, we should note that the 'proto-text'³ or the original source is hypothetically reconstructed through identification of semantic invariants going back to the absent original text (ibid.: 76)⁴. In the case of genre or canon formation, the original proto-texts become "intertexts" and through dissemination have "dissolved within culture, turning into multiple metatexts" (ibid.). The notion of intertextuality (including intermediality) includes both the "condition of text preceding the text process, but also a reflection of the strategy of the process", and this intertextuality can be analysed in two fields, i.e. the identification of "intertextuality as semiotic (semiotizing) space, i.e. a possible world of meaning generation, and specific elements (fragments) of one text in another text as intexts" (ibid.:80-81)⁵. The notion of intext allows us to identify 'fragments' of texts as specific variant and invariant elements continuous between meta and proto texts. Such intertextual elements or fragments can be identified as continuous in the intertextual space emerging between our chosen meta text and canonically associated proto texts.

In examining the forms of transformation of elements between proto- and meta texts, we can note the degrees of four inevitable procedures: "preservation, change, exclusion and addition of text elements" (Torop 2000: 88). These procedures are also reflected in Popovic's notion of selective,

³ In the terms of Popovic (1976), the new text is a 'meta-text' and the original reproduced text is the 'proto-text'.

⁴ All nostalgic meta texts are not simply independent or autonomous texts but retain constitutive allusions to older texts. In similar extratextual productions of new texts based on old sources, for example in a film adaptation of a literary novel, the film exists in a 'double' reality, i.e. as an autonomous text as well as an interpretation of an earlier text, but this requires a minimum knowledge of the earlier text in the mind of the perceiver (Torop 2000: 87), otherwise it exists simply as an autonomous text.

⁵ Further, Gaifman's definition of intertextuality is appropriate here as it "unites intertextuality and intertextuality: 1) a technical aspect of intertextual connections, or the problems of discovery of intertextual elements; 2) the nature of an intertextual connection (creating an atmosphere, background, hidden code which may be deciphered, etc.); 3) the degree of explicitness of one text in another text; 4) in what aspect a text is active in another text; 5) the role of one text in another text (see Gaifman 1989: 191-195)." (Torop 2000: 81). This is a convenient definition because it identifies the "atmospheric" and "hidden" quality of this special kind of 'concealed' intertextuality.

reductive, imitative and complementary continuity between ‘metatexts’ and ‘prototexts’ (Popovic 1976: 231-232). Popovic notes that the relation between meta and proto text is one of varying degrees of continuity decided by the semantic transformations of variant or invariant components in a text, which reveal their stylistic similarities and dissimilarities according to conventional genres or themes, and which thus give rise to axiological readings i.e. value ascribed by certain transformative procedures (affirmative or controversial, etc.). Popovic indicates that through selective forms of continuity, the meta text may be typologised differently (see Figure 1). In our particular interest is the nature of 'concealed' continuity. As Popovic also notes, meta textual study should include a diachronic or temporal dimension which determines the degree to which the perceiver of a meta text is connected to the perceiver of the proto-text, i.e. how much the "allusiveness of the original text" is perceivable in the meta text (ibid.: 233). A present work that is more or less distant from a historical work being imitated will hold a respectively concealed or obvious connection. This goes some way to explain how different generations and readers of the text derive different interpretations and experiences from the same text.

Typology of Metatexts

Way of linking a text to a text	Affirmative ←→ Controversial			
	Apparent ←→ Concealed		Apparent ←→ Concealed	
Scope of linking	Apparent ←→ Concealed		Apparent ←→ Concealed	
Elements or levels of text	Quotation / motto / allusion, cento, reproduction of text / direct, indirect /, mediated 'reading' / title, annotation, summary, retelling, etc. /	Subconscious allusion, reminiscence, paraphrase, imitation	'Editio purificata' / censorship /; paradoxically interpreted quotation;	Critical allusion without giving source
Text as a whole	Translation; 'tendentious transcription'; praising review* /, pastiche	Formulated intention of the author to write a text; plagiarism; second-hand translation, 'pseudo-translation,' method of pseudonym'	Polemical translation; travesty; literary pamphlet, critical polemic**	Parody

*Literary portrait, literary essay, impressionistic étude, article-treatise, criticism, article-instruction, literary survey, feuilleton-critical, obituary, note-recommendation, literary advertisement, reader's reaction, etc.
 **Literary and critical pamphlet, dialogue, parody, letter, aphorism, etc.

Fig. 1: Popovic's (1976: 232) typological description of meta textual operations.

Further, the notion of dominant in a text is important to be identified. The dominant is an objective element or level that provides textual unity and during translation this dominant can be transposed "from one level to another, from structure to function etc." (Torop 2000: 88.).

We may state that in the case of nostalgic retro cultural texts that reproduce old forms, the dominant has become the 'mnemonic' function of the text (Lotman 1990: 18-19), i.e. recalling the generic conventions of the proto-text in the meta text. We will see shortly how retro cultural texts as meta texts can be described as mnemonic texts in cultural memory.

2.2 Traces of cultural memory in cultural texts

Intertextuality is importantly not just the space of contact between texts and genres in continuity⁶ but also with the social contexts and history that surround the text. This is why R Lachmann's notion of intertextual strategy of (re- or de-) construction of texts includes the scope of the ideological in the notion of "implicit text" which is a "place where different text meanings intersect and are bundled together, it is where produced and concretized meaning overlap, where meaning increases and semantic potential is restricted; it is the place where history and society relate to the text and where the text relates to history and society." (Lachmann 1987: 25). And so it is imperative to also analyse the ideological codes that are 'encoded' into the text implicitly, which become available in interpretation.

In the semiotics of culture, the process of creative translation of texts and codes is a mechanism in the generation and interpretation of new cultural culture. The semiotics of culture offers a framework for texts as fundamentally related to the memory of culture. Lotman and Uspenskij's understanding of culture is as a "nonhereditary memory of the community, a memory expressing itself in a system of constraints and prescriptions" (Lotman and Uspenskij 1978: 213). Culture as a record of the community's experience is "of necessity, connected to past historical experience" (ibid.:214). Culture is always perceived retrospectively, and so "when people speak of the creation of a new culture, they are inevitably looking ahead; that is, they have in mind that which

⁶ In terms of the semiotic spatial positioning of a (inter)text, Torop (2000) states that a text itself exists in a minimum of two intertextual spaces of interpretation which encompasses its 'double reality'— in each space that it inhabits it may have more or less continual connections with other existing texts, traditions and genres of that space. Within intertextual spaces, texts make contact through regular (traditional) or casual (subjective) connections between other texts as a whole, but also between other groups of interrelated texts that are grouped ideologically, thematically or as genres (ibid.: 76-78). Intertextual space can be imagined "as concentric circles (with the center in the text): the level of text generation intertextuality, the level of discursive characteristics of text, the level of the intertextuality of text poetics, the level of extratextual connections, of the historical period, etc. Every text is simultaneously situated in different circles of the concentrum." (ibid.: 78) Thus in analysis, meta texts are seen to be in contact with these historical intertextual spaces, i.e. proto-texts, codes and existing traditions in cultural memory, although they also overlap with new intertextual spaces that ascribe different causal connections and thus new varying interpretations.

(they presume) will become a memory from the point of view of the reconstructable future (of course, the correctness of such an assumption will only be shown by the future itself)." (ibid.). Marek Tamm (Tamm 2019, Tamm and Torop 2022) has outlined Lotman's interweaving fields of culture, memory and history. Along with a mapping of the evolution of Lotman's semiotic theory — an "isomorphic chain: text—culture—semiosphere" (Tamm 2019: 8), Tamm highlights that "Lotman's major contribution to the development of semiotics consists in highlighting the mnemonic function of culture and placing it at the core of the semiotic analysis of culture" (ibid.: 9), with a later turn towards a 'historical semiotics' (Tamm, 2020: 336), alongside a poetics of everyday behaviour, affect and emotions. Our interests lie in Tamm's elaboration on Lotman's work on the dynamics of cultural memory, and in particular the dynamics of transformation of cultural memory through the processes of history. "The dynamics of cultural memory are understood by Lotman as primarily the interaction of codes and texts: creative memory generates not only new texts but also new ways of interpreting and encoding them" (Tamm 2019:11). This involves a recording of new information, accumulating earlier interpretations through revisiting of old texts, and selecting and *forgetting certain aspects* of the texts — "The conversion of a chain of facts into a text is invariably accompanied by selection; that is, by fixing certain events which are translatable into elements of the text and forgetting others, marked as nonessential. In this sense every text furthers not only the remembering process, but forgetting as well" (Lotman and Uspenskij 1978: 216). Thus culture is described here as a system of memory involving both the creative forgetting and re-visiting old texts.

Besides cultural formation through texts, texts also reflect culture and record the memory of culture, as with the case of retro texts as 'meta cultural' texts. This is achieved by an isomorphism of the text with culture that is important in Lotman's epistemology. When describing the communication between the text and its cultural context, Lotman (1988) states that the text may be perceived as a "a substitute for the overall context to which it is, in a certain respect, equivalent, or as metonymic, as when a text represents the context as a part of the whole" (Lotman 1988: 56) Further, texts can 'self-recode', i.e. rediscover their old codes through reinterpretation when entering into new context or read by a new generation. The text is hence paradoxically autonomous as a text but also reflecting the whole of culture and a part of it. When describing the mnemonic function of texts, Lotman (1990) mentions that a cultural text

condenses cultural memory and "has the capacity to preserve the memory of its previous contexts" (1990: 18). Previous interpretations of the text get encoded into the structure of the text as fragments, the perception of which becomes "a metonymy of a reconstructed integral meaning, a discrete sign of a non-discrete essence" (ibid.), and this preservation of contextual interpretations in the text through subsequent readings is termed its "text memory". The text becomes 'alive' and interacts with the tradition of memory that is already present in the perceiver's consciousness. In such a way, texts survive on in memory and have 'afterlives' (Benjamin 1997(1923): 153) because of continual new translations and reproductions. Lotman brings up the special importance of meta texts, which is of interest to us. While any cultural text can reflect culture, a meta text (such as in retro culture) "enter[s] into deciphering and structuring relations with some metalinguistic formation [...] contain[s] within it both textual and meta textual elements as particular substructures" (Lotman 1988:57).

In this sense, the present text which resembles or imitates the old text includes at a meta level some additional codified information, perceived as metonymies of the cultural context that surrounded the original source text. This provides clarification at the level of textual operations, to support the argument that previous interpretations and social contexts around an old text become accessible through new productions and interpretations of the new text, as proposed by the previous literature on modern nostalgia. To clarify, this perceptual 'discreteness' of 'non-discrete' extratextual essence does not necessarily imply explicitness (for example in meta textual translation through addendums or footnotes) but may instead include a more elusive 'atmosphere' of the old context concealed in the new text. That is to say, these fragments of text memory may not necessarily be 'activated' or represented in the meta text. This determines the variability in its deployments — as 'good' vs 'bad' nostalgia, and so on. These are contingent interpretations that are based on the dominant elements in the meta texts. But it is clear that regardless of its new contexts and interpretations, the fragments of proto-textual contexts and interpretations will remain *dormant* in the meta text. This explains, for example, how Leone's 1950's radio when purchased today includes the imagined utopias and contextual meanings attached to the object in the period when it was contemporary in the 1950's. The text thus lives on in cultural memory through dormant fragments, and these texts and codes may be lost, waiting to be recoded.

While codes and texts are continually being ‘forgotten’ in the dynamics of cultural memory, in retro their elements remain as fragments, waiting to be revived, recoded and recombined. Nunes (2017) also echoes the same conclusion while applying the dynamics of cultural memory to the temporally complex cultural texts of steampunk, a sub-genre of retrofuturism:

“If we agree with Lotman that oblivion and memory draw a sinusoidal pattern in culture, we should understand that certain texts are illuminated by memory, while others, submersed in the semiosphere, live in a state of potentiality, but do not disappear. This fluctuation of texts, some activated and others as potential texts, characterizes the semiotic continuum. “ Nunes (2017, para.29)

Further, in retro culture there is the consideration of the affective dimension of the mnemonic function of the meta text, i.e. these discrete fragments produce in the reader a continuous experience. We may now note the possibility of a semio-psychoanalytical approach to this ‘unconscious’ memory of the text. These meta textual elements are not stable or fixed but *fragmented* — partial, incomplete, complex and ambivalent. These elements remain available as an affective ‘excess’ to project new recombinatory narratives and fantasies onto. For example, younger generations who watch shows like *Stranger Things* are no longer the original subjects who have lost the object of analogue technology that is now desired, but they nevertheless project their fantasies onto it through the perception of the desired object’s opposition to current digital modes and media (Louis-Paul Willis 2022). The signifiers of the 80’s, detached from their original referents, thus become ‘floating’, in Sadeq Rahimi’s terms (2021). Rahimi is developing the notion of ‘hauntology’, which was coined by Jacques Derrida (2011) to describe the way meaning is constructed through traces rather than through any supposed ideal of presence or temporal stability of sign processes. Proceeding from Abraham and Torok’s notion of the ‘crypt’ which holds ‘secrets’ inside a text, Rahimi speaks of:

“the intergenerational transmission of the phantom which is captured in that crypt and is “transmitted” via the collective space of the symbolic order, specifically language, from one generation to the next. Little effort is required to conceptualize the psychosemiotic process whereby an objet a, orphaned due to the (typically abrupt and/or culturally un-processable, unjustifiable) destruction of its original subject, would remain

unprocessed and unfinished, floating in the “limbo” of collectively shared symbolic space until the “right” subject shows up to experience or even own it (be haunted by it), decode its semiotic content into subjective experience, and possibly even process and resolve it and thus liberate the “ghost” to move on to the realm of the dead.” (Rahimi 2021: 59)

Thus, meta textual ‘fragments’ in the retro text thus can be described as ‘traces’ of cultural memory of old proto-texts and their cultural codes and contexts, that are open to new recombinatory re-interpretation. In the next section, we can explore Derrida’s notion of traces and hauntology in depth. The advantage of describing these fragments as ‘traces’, and thereby accessing Derrida’s hauntology as a metalanguage for analysis, is in hauntology’s specialised focus on the experiential, affective and ontological conditions of such fragmented temporalities.

2.3 Haunting as a source of semiotic instability in retro texts

We should now examine haunting as a semiotic mechanism, to understand its potential as a conceptual framework at the level of the sign and the text. We should understand hauntology as a framework developed around notions of ‘traces’ and spectres, such that allow it to approach problems of ‘floating’, partially forgotten cultural memories represented through the fragments of earlier cultural codes and elements in retro texts.

In order to integrate Derrida’s hauntology into an understanding of textual operations and a semiotic relation between cultural memory and cultural texts, there is first the need to establish an understanding of Derrida’s hauntology as a critique of Saussurean semiology. Instead of signs in language, and by extension elements in texts, being fixed and stable entities, hauntology reveals that signs are produced through ‘traces’ — ghostly chains of signification, and these traces can produce a *semiotic effect* of haunting.

Derrida’s proposition that any present sign and its ontological experience in time is not contemporary with itself, instead it exists as ‘haunted’ by unrealised possibilities. In classical Western philosophy, the sensibility and intelligibility of a sign in ontological experience was determined firstly by its temporal presence as distinct from other things in the world. Instead according to Derrida, signs function as a result of the play of *différance*. Meaning (and ontological Being) is always differed (in that a sign differs from another in the system according

to Saussure's rules of arbitrary motivation and equivalence) and also temporally deferred (the meaning of the sign cannot be realised without an understanding of paradigmatically and (spatio)temporally adjacent signs). In both modes, the crucial (non) 'presence' of *différance* is the interval, the gap, the spacing between signs and the signifier and its signified. *Différance* involves a "temporization" (Derrida, 1982: 34) — the movement between the present thing and its sign, the suspension of the "accomplishment or fulfillment of 'desire' or 'will'" (ibid.). This is why *différance* is "neither a word nor concept" (ibid.: 34) but a 'movement', and cannot be described through direct discourse. It belongs to neither speech nor writing, but exists in the space "between speech and writing" (ibid.: 35). *Différance* is itself not a "present-being in any form" (ibid.). This *différance* occurs through traces — any 'present' sign is always related to something other than itself — i.e., a trace or mark of some other absent sign. "An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself" (Derrida 1982: 31-46). This empty space between signs is what creates the "becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space" (ibid.). Presence (of the sign) is created from the material of 'traces' of other signs. In his *Of Grammatology* (1976), Derrida expanded on the concept of the 'trace' as a sign that conceals something, including its own production, so that the original movement that created the trace is occulted. Secrecy itself is held in secret. In this light, signs always conceal something that they signify, and there is always some meaning that escapes explicit signification. But because of this, it is almost impossible to define as it itself resists expression. Derrida elaborates on the trace to show that it does not only occult its origins but is the "origin of origins" (Derrida 1976: 61) — the trace produces meaning, it is the "difference which opens up appearance and signification" (Derrida 1976: 65). The trace-sign is necessarily a partial, incomplete presence. Traces are thus the units of the movement of *différance*, meaning is synthesised by accounting for traces, and paradigmatic signification is produced by an assemblage of trace signs. Saussure's system of signs is subsumed by a system of traces.

It is in the space of *différance* between the present and the absent sign in which meaning becomes unstable, ambivalent and time becomes 'out of joint', in Hamlet's words. In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida (2011) develops the conceptual metaphor of a spectre of unrealised signs, interpretations, and meanings that are hidden from the present. The spectre is thus an embodied sign of a semiotic movement of *différance* experienced as that which could-have-been, emerging from the

interval space between the present sign or element in a text and the excluded others. As Monticelli (2008) writes, “the figure of the spectre therefore marks this ‘anachrony of being’, this contamination of being with non-being or non-identity of being with itself which is (disjointed) time” (2008: 101). Thus Derrida’s hauntology offers a radical critique of the supposed “self-identity of the living present, its constitutive force, the fixation of meaning, the drive to completion and temporal wholeness” (ibid.) while also urging for an openness to ‘speak with ghosts’, to keep open an “exposure-vulnerability to what is experienced as profoundly significant but still lacking clear meaning” (2008: 109). This defines the nature of the trace through which the spectre haunts — it is affective, but seems to “defy semantics as much as ontology” (Derrida 2011: 221). As Avery Gordon puts it — “If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place” (Gordon 2013: 107).

We may consider meaning-making through *différance* in traces as universal to language and culture, while haunting is an aesthetic-affective effect of *différance*. In retro texts, this haunting effect becomes narratively or aesthetically represented through the (spatio)temporal arrangement of trace-elements in the structure of the text.

In this chapter, we first examined how retro cultural texts as meta texts reproduce historical textual forms and codes through intertextual fragments. These are not merely textual fragments of the imitated historical texts, but are also fragments of cultural memory. Memories of shared social contexts are encoded in these meta texts as additional meta level information, as metonymic ‘non-discrete essences’ of past cultural contextual readings of the original texts. Thus we emphasised the mnemonic function of retro texts, which serve as repositories of cultural memory that may lay ‘dormant’ as potential sources of rediscovered meaning. However, these dormant ‘fragments’ of meta level information are partial, incomplete, and unprocessed due to the loss of the original subjective readings of the codes and texts. This unstable and floating nature has required us to re-imagine these signs or elements at the level of the text through

Derrida's hauntology — i.e. not as stable, fixed identities but instead as ambivalent trace-signs, which produce haunting as aesthetic-affective 'effect' of their incomplete and alienating play of *différance*. Thus these once-dormant or unconscious trace-elements or fragments of text-memory are the 'discrete signs' of the 'non-discrete essence' of cultural memory that get represented as 'empirical signs of haunting' within the retro text. Thus hauntology allows us to describe both the semiotic instability and the partial, fragmented, unstable and elusive nature of aestheticised memory in trace-elements in retro texts. We can now envision the retro text as a haunted textual space populated by spectres of historical texts and their cultural contexts. These texts also reflect the haunted nature of the present culture they are in contact with, and in the next chapter we will examine the haunting memories of actual events and processes of history that are conjured in retro texts.

3. Haunting as a generative force in cultural history

In the previous chapter, we arrived at hauntology as a framework for the analysis of temporally unstable retro texts. Haunting as an effect of semiotic instability becomes aestheticised in retro texts, but as *meta cultural* texts that conjure traces of cultural memory, it is important to look at what memories are actually represented in these texts. As in the case of 80's retrofuturism such as in *Blinding Lights*, there are no clear mentions of specific events of history, instead a vague or implicit allusion to a general context of 80's-ness. However, as pointed out by Mark Fisher's hauntological analysis, the nostalgia conjured by retro does indeed stem from an aesthetic representation of the unfinished historical processes that proceeded from specific watershed moments such as the global revolutionary zeitgeist of the late 1960's and 1970's. Thus by aestheticising their haunting by texts from those bygone eras, modern cultural texts like *Blinding Lights* are conjuring traces of historical experiences encoded in cultural memory, i.e., they are both haunted texts and reflecting a haunted nature of culture as a whole. In this chapter, we will make a shift from the level of the haunted text to the level of the larger processes of haunted cultural history. We are concerned here with describing how certain generative forces in history can be described as processes of haunting, which become reflected and represented within retro texts.

We will begin with a review of Lotman's notion of cultural explosion as an event of radical semiotic change in the historical systemic development of culture. We will discuss haunting as a vertical or synchronic force of history on the present by alternative and abandoned futures, as part of an integral process in generating cultural 'explosions'. Specifically, the situation of explosion is brought about by the returning and haunting presence of past unrealised possibilities from unresolved or abandoned explosions in the past. We will then note how the concept of explosion already lends itself well to an interpretation as an affective atmosphere. The affect produced in explosive situations can be reproduced in future explosions and is captured and reflected at the level of the meta cultural text that reflects these returning explosions. Thus we will have established the semiotic explosion as produced by forces of historical haunting, and retro texts as reflecting and reproducing this experience of explosion in the experiencing reader or subject.

This will provide a segue for further discussion in Chapter 4 where will explore some relevant descriptions of the subjective experience of haunting offered by Derrida's hauntology.

3.1 Explosions in cultural historical development

The later works of Juri Lotman and the Tartu Moscow School elaborated on the delimitation of a field of 'historical semiotics' or a semiotics of history. The transformation of culture depends on dynamics in cultural history due to 'radical turns' which Lotman calls 'cultural explosions'. Lotman described historical processes in culture and society in general as a product of gradual processes punctuated by cultural explosions (2009), caused when the coding and translating systems available to a culture are unable or insufficient to translate new texts that are brought into it. This situation manifests in the unpredictability of explosive processes resulting in historical events, where multiple translations of a text, and therefore reconstructions of reality, are equally possible. Explosions are caused by either "an intensive onslaught of new cultural texts" or arise "from a situation in which new texts for which the culture's internal tradition has no adequate codes for deciphering, enter cultural memory" (Tamm 2019). The concept of explosion brings into historiographical discourse the nature of unpredictability and randomness which are otherwise removed and excluded from the historian's gaze, creating the illusion of linear and causal time. In fact, historical events in the past as they transpired were the results of disruptive and unpredictable causalities, which is why "from the standpoint of the semiotics of history, the event that has occurred is only one of the possible versions; thus, historical research cannot be reduced to merely investigating the circumstances and the inevitability of the historical event" Tamm (2019: 19). As Tamm explains, the explosive event is characterised by the opening up of a point of bifurcation where multiple equally possible alternative scenarios can be 'chosen'. The choice between these paths at the explosive moment or point of bifurcation is seen as random. Thus, history is a 'multi-factored stream' and "a historical event should be seen as the result of one of multiple alternatives, meaning that, at a certain point (the point of bifurcation), the same circumstances in history might not have unequivocal consequences" (ibid.). With the close of the explosion, the historian's causal gaze of the event is produced —

"[The event] casts a retrospective reflection. In this way, the character of that which has occurred is completely transformed [...] Looking from the past into the future, we see the present as a complete collection of a series of equally probable possibilities. When we look into the past, reality acquires the status of fact and we are inclined to see it as the only possible realisation. Unrealised possibilities are transformed into possibilities which could not be realised." (Lotman 2009: 125).

Explosions are fundamental to Lotman's semiotic theory of cultural history (Tamm 2022: 336). Other than the role of unpredictability and randomness, there is the heterogeneity and 'polychronicity' of history which is made of 'multiple layers' developing at different speeds, inspired by the works of Juri Tynianov. Multiple historical layers co-exist and so a cross-section would reveal different stages of evolution. Simplified, there are two types of historical change — gradual processes as studied by the 'Annales school', and explosive processes which we are interested in. Finally, there is also the dynamism of internal and external factors in the transformation of culture, "by continual self-renewal, by reinterpreting itself and providing new self-descriptions, but also by receiving foreign impulses and effects". (Tamm 2022: 337).

Daniele Monticelli (2019, 2020) is also instructive in a spatial re-modelling of Lotman's explosive process by locating explosion within the semiosphere as a process of translation in dialogue. In Lotman's understanding of the semiosphere, culture is a 'space of dialogue' between a minimum of two systems. Culture as a "binary system presents itself at first sight as a paradoxical construction" (Monticelli 2019:391-392) of a minimum of two languages which are in a relationship of mutual untranslatability but maintain also a minimum similarity or a 'reciprocally related difference' in order to maintain dialogue. Translation in dialogue is fundamental to Lotman's conception of homogenizing and heterogenizing forces within the semiosphere or culture. The semiosphere involves two meta systemic movements — "exhaustive and totalizing" (Monticelli 2019: 398) meta structural translation located at the 'core', and "translation in cases of untranslatability" which amount to "difficult and inadequate translations presupposing a fundamental untranslatable residuum that may become the point of departure for always new (similarly inadequate but equally right) translations" (Monticelli 2019: 398). We can already see that this 'translation in cases of untranslatability' that produces a residual 'point of

departure' for 'new and equally correct translations' can be identified as the process at the point of bifurcation which generates equally possible scenarios to 'choose' from in the situation of cultural explosion. This 'translation of the untranslatable' occurs as the "separating and connective function of the border" (Monticelli 2019: 398) of the semiosphere, located at the 'periphery' — "a peculiar place with a topography that essentially differs from the homogeneous hierarchical organization of the center" (ibid.).

Monticelli (2020) also discusses in spatial metalanguage a 'space of explosion'. Lotman (2009: 135) writes of an 'explosive space' and explains that "the explosion itself involves a sphere that was previously situated outside the boundaries of the given culture, which was inaccessible by the usual paths" (Lotman 2009: 69). This explosive space is described by Lotman (2009) through the metaphor of the minefield. Monticelli (2020) describes the logic of explosion in a spatial model (see below Fig.2). Monticelli mentions that the explosion is —

"experienced as if it were 'excluded from time', where 'time' is the unilinear, unidirectional, teleologically oriented time of the gradual process. By suspending the regular flow of gradual processes, the explosion moves this time out of joint, as Derrida would say. This is why it would be wrong to understand Lotman's explosion as the occurrence of a single event. The explosion coincides rather with the opening of a space where unpredictable events may take place" (Monticelli 2020: 193).

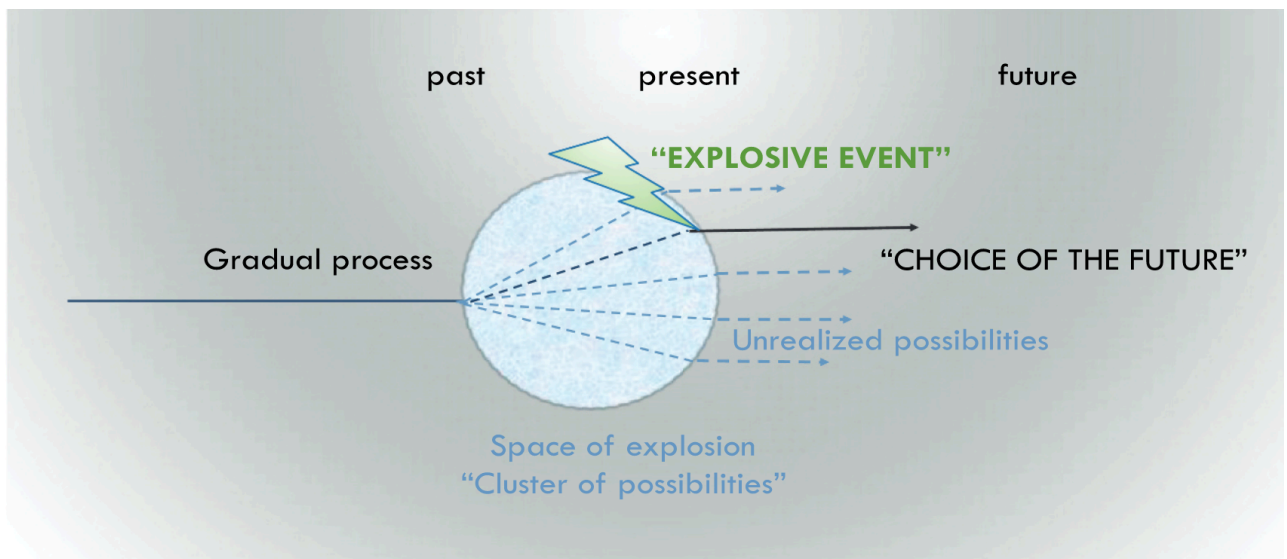


Figure 2: Monticelli's (2020: 194) spatial logic of explosion

Now, Monticelli (2008, 2019, 2022) has brought into comparison Derrida and Lotman — Derrida's deconstruction and *différance* is a procedure of 'temporal detotalization' (Monticelli 2008) alongside Lotman's unpredictability and randomness in processes of cultural explosions. Monticelli in the recent book *Companion to Yuri Lotman* has discussed at depth the parallels between Lotman and Derrida, by locating the equivalence of Derrida's notion of *différance* with 'difference' in Lotman's theory — "Difference [which] is the ontological ground of Lotman's dialogical epistemology [...] which Lotman variably calls 'binarism', 'heterogeneity', 'polyglotism', can thus be considered the foundation of Derrida's as well as Lotman's understandings of language and communication" (Monticelli, 2022). Monticelli also shows how the inexhaustible translation of the untranslatable at the 'border' of culture parallels Derrida's movement of *différance* — in that *différance*, similar to Lotman's translation of the untranslatable, involves a deferral of stable meanings due to the inexhaustible generation of new meanings and also the non-identity of the original text with itself and thus the irreversibility of translation (Monticelli 2019: 398).

Monticelli elaborates on an integration of Lotman's periphery and Derrida's notion of disadjustment and the metaphor of the spectre (Derrida 2011) — "in order to acquire the theoretical tools that would enable us to conceptualize the specific topography of the border

space". Monticelli thus aims for a spatialisation of Derrida's hauntology by turning Derrida's "disadjustment as lack of self-identity and internal undecidability from a temporal or chronosymbolic to a spatial or toposymbolic domain" (Monticelli 2019: 399). More specifically: "the border-zone as periphery is out-of-joint [as in Hamlet's exclamation at the moment of haunting] or disarticulated because it belongs at the same time to [..or..] belongs neither to the internal nor external space [...] This topological undecidability is matched by semiotic undecidability" (ibid.). The overlapping of different times and spaces due to radical structural heterogeneity at the periphery creates the 'tension' that is characteristic to the periphery (Monticelli 2019: 402). As in Monticelli's analysis of the poem "L'Infinito" by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi, this tension amounts to a 'fear' (2019: 399-403). Monticelli also notes Lotman and Uspenkiĭ's conception of 'infinity' as the state of being of the "contraposition between an internal and an external space, of their incompatibility and incommunicability" (Monticelli 2019: 402). According to Monticelli, "infinity is a good way of describing the opening of a border-space as a place out-of-joint, where the internal and the external cross one another giving rise to a topographical undecidability" (Monticelli 2019: 402). In our reading, this conception of infinity at the periphery, can be seen again as located at the bifurcation point in the semiotic explosion at the moment of translation of the untranslatable. This again brings to mind Derrida's notion of "a singularity on the basis of which a world is opened" in the gaze of the dead Other, i.e. the spectre. This spectre "was someone for whom a world, that is to say, a possible infinity or a possible indefiniteness of experiences was open" (Derrida and Stiegler, 2013: 42). This opening of a moment of infinity is due to the return of the spectre, who imposes its injunction of the (infinite) alternative futures that are re-opened up during the moment of the conjuring of the spectre and its gaze upon the haunted subject.

We have in this section introduced the notion of semiotic explosions, their role in the dynamics of historical development, their location within semiospheric culture, and their semiotic mechanisms of translation of the untranslatable. We have also hinted at a convergence with Derrida's notion of the spectre of possibility, i.e. viewing the border-zone of culture as a space out-of-joint, and the moment of explosion as marked by an opening of infinity on basis of which the spectre operates. In the next section, we will see how this spectre is a spectre of *returning* possibility — the

unrealised possibilities of past explosions lay dormant (through traces of cultural memory) and return as spectres that are conjured at moments of future explosions.

3.2 Haunting by unrealised possibilities for future explosions

We have until now focused on semiotic explosions which in cultural history appear as revolutionary events that usher in new languages, codes and meaningful interpretations in culture. We may return to the example of the ‘watershed’ moment of the 1968 student riots in France and the subsequent global revolutionary zeitgeist as such an explosive event (see Kurlansky 2010) , in which new cultural codes and social imaginaries proliferated. However, as in this case of the subsequent defusal of such revolutionary momentum through neoliberal policies in the 1970’s and 1980’s, explosions may not actually result in transformative change but may be subdued or reified by certain dominant actors. The explosion as lived and worked through is marked by moments of tension and high uncertainty which can lead to tragic errors and regressive interpretations and meanings. What is potentially revolutionary is de-radicalised, producing what Lotman refers to as ‘inauthentic’ or “imitative explosions as a form of anti-explosive structure” (Lotman 2009: 9). Laura Gherlone defines this situation as an inauthentic or “fallacious explosion because, while presenting itself as a moment of suspension, it actually does not break the chain of cause and effect, nor does it generate substantially new information” (Gherlone 2022: 289). Thus, the possible futures and explosive social and cultural transformations are abandoned as unrealised possibilities that could-have-been.

However, these unrealised possibilities remain dormant in culture, retaining their potential to act as a resource for future cultural explosions and dynamism. As Marek Tamm (2019) notes, random events may cause explosions but "these accidental elements can also act as a reserve for future reorganizations of the culture" (Tamm 2019: 19). As we will argue, these unrealised possibilities are exactly those that 'return' as spectres to haunt the present in the logic of explosion, in the terms of Derrida's hauntological epistemology (see Fig.3).

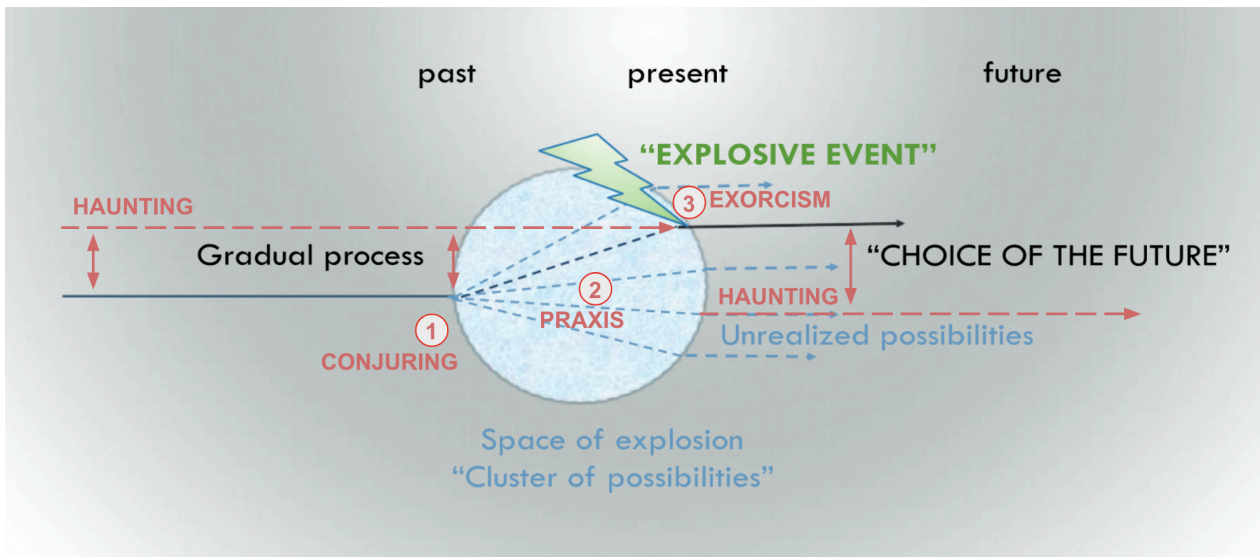


Figure 3: Our own additions to Monticelli's (2020) logic of explosion, bringing in the terms of Derrida's hauntology

In Fig.3, we have located haunting as a historical 'effect' or productive force in the spatially modelled logic of explosion. In Monticelli's original schema, Lotman's 'unrealized possibilities' are tellingly extended beyond the explosive event. We propose that these parallel unrealised possibilities are exactly Derrida's spectres of unrealised futures of the past, represented through the traces of deferred Being, will and desire, which 'haunt' the present during gradual processes before and after the explosion. This relation of 'haunting' between the split, alienated and unstable present and the spectres of unrealised futures is a bidirectional relation between the two parallel temporalities that conjoin as equally possible alternatives at the moment of explosion. The two concomitant temporalities are in conflict, and bring together two 'worlds' — the real extant historical context and the unrealised world of possibilities that could-have-been. It is the latter world into which the nostalgic 'tourist' adventures. It is along this vertical axis that the haunted present subject orients itself through a 'sideways' gaze (Boym, 2001) through nostalgia in retro culture. And conversely, the haunted subject feels 'seen' by the gaze and injunction of the spectre of history. In Derrida's logic of haunting, the spectres of abandoned futures demand an injunction on the part of the haunted subject, a setting-right or adjunction of the world that is out-of-joint. Their injunction becomes visible in moments of a 'conjuring of the ghost' (1), i.e. the (re)presentation of traces signs metaphorized by Derrida as an embodiment of the spectre. This moment of the appearance and recognition of the ghost is the moment of bifurcation in Lotman's

terms, where a space of indeterminacy and unpredictability opens up. The unrealised futures of the spectre at this moment become the possible scenarios that the haunted subject can 'choose' from, and the gaze of the spectre re-produces the infinity of potentialities that could-have-been and are now again present at the given moment of 'choice'. The spectre's injunction produces the "chance of the future" (Derrida 2011: 33), and the realisation of its injunction by the 'praxis' (2) of the haunted subject correlates with Lotman's idea of the 'choice of the future' made during the explosive event. As the explosive process closes, the haunting of unrealised futures of the past is realised with the adjustment of the world. Through the retrospective gaze of the historian, the unpredictability of the explosion is stabilised again into a linear cause-effect logic of the gradual process; this requires an 'exorcism' (3) of spectres in order to prevent their further returns and ensure the stability of the newly-established present. The conjuring of the ghost thus has set in motion the explosive process that results in radical new meanings and cultural, social and political innovation. We will explain more of the hauntological terms and the subjective experience of conjuring (1), praxis (2) and exorcism (3) as they align with phases of the explosion in Chapter 4.

Thus, the haunting of history is a temporal 'force' of unrealised futures acting upon the temporally split present, and is generative of the conditions necessary for explosive processes, which can be modelled spatially. The advantage of hauntology as an analytical framework is its access to metalanguage for the aesthetic-affective experience of the subject of explosion, which we will examine in depth later in Chapter 4. In the next section we will explore how the notion of semiotic explosion already lends itself to an affective analysis of the experience of a subject in the explosion.

3.3 Explosion as haunted affective atmospheres

In the preliminary remarks in our Introduction, we already explained our conception of how the experience of a subject is related to their accessing cultural memory through the reading or consumption of a cultural text. By now, we have noted how the cultural text of retro is a meta cultural text reflecting the processes and events of history, namely past historical semiotic explosions. However as we will see, the explosion is also defined by the affect it produces in an

experiencing subject that lives through the explosion. This affect (for example, of utopianism) can be reproduced in future explosive situations, and is captured and reflected at the level of the meta cultural text that reflects these returning explosions, contingent on the interpretation and ethical position of the reading subject.

The affective experience of explosive time can be conceived of first through Benjamin's work on historical experience. In Benjamin's work, historic cognition is —

“cognition of that ‘which has not yet become history, that which yet can become history’, because its possibilities, and that is, possibilities of happiness, have not yet been actualised. History is only possible because of the possibilities that were missed” (Hamacher 2001:163).

This affective experience of historic cognition is a ‘continuous’ experience, and in the case of retro cultural texts is produced by the discrete elements of the text. Petrovsky (2017) contributes here in discussing how the utopianism of countercultural and avant-garde movements can be understood as experiential. The aesthetic avant-garde is a ‘sociohistorical phenomenon’ but which has an intrinsic dynamic and futural dimension rather than being a generic category to be archived or designated to history. Instead, the avant-garde is a ‘continuous experience’ which can be re-initiated today “in a radically changed environment” as “a space of social imagination, and therefore freedom” (2017: 257) For us, we can note that was once avant garde in past explosions (for example, the aesthetics of 80's futurism) that subsequently became mainstream still retains the potentiality or futural dimension that makes it avant garde, through traces of its affective experience that get (re)presented in meta texts.

Explosion is conceived of as fundamentally reliant on an affective dimension. Laura Gherlone (2022) writes that the explosion acts as an ‘agent force’ “almost with its own intentionality, which encounters/clashes with the individual-collective subject's force – it seems to be a mnemonic-affective-sensory intelligence that makes use of familiar images symbols from the past (something similar to archetypal schemas) to become present and graspable” (Gherlone 2022: 288). Gherlone also brings in the affective notion of ‘atmosphere’ which is close to Lotman's explosion:

“The explosion, like the atmosphere, is a moment dense with meaning in which it is possible to perceive a diffuse agency that binds the parts in an integrated whole, which, in turn, generates space for immersive experiences of unpredictable understanding of the past, present and future, namely immersive insights into the semiosphere as an ecosystem of interrelations, holistically grasped, between semiotic forms from different times and different places.” (Gherlone 2023: 96)

The explosion is an affective situation and event which involves “leaving space for creative narratives (not exclusively verbal) of possible future worlds, momentarily suspending consolidated and effortless interpretative patterns whose outcomes are predictable.” (ibid.: 95). This ‘leaving space’ in our reading is the leaving of the space of *différance*, a space from which the spectre can emerge and offer its injunction to the present.

Crucially, explosive event's affective charge sediments in 'deposits' or ensembles of codified signs which allow for continual re-interpretation, ‘(re)surfacing in situated events’ —

“In this way, this energy lasts over time in the form of an affect-intensive imaginary, accompanying and nourishing cultural memory and, at times, surfacing (or exploding) in situated events. The explosion (which does not necessarily have to be negative and destructive) thus highlights that there is a deep link between affect (notably in the distributed form of collective or shared emotions), the semiotic-textual and social interrelations (implicit and explicit) that weave the event, the ghostly and diachronically deep time, which keeps unexploded mines in the “bowels” of culture, and space or, better still, place: that stratified set of “coordinates” (texts, objects, spatial and architectural arrangements, climatic peculiarities, etc.) that affords memory and allows the past to become present in the form of “exceptionally vivid, almost spasmodic outbursts” (Lotman, 2019: 137). This dynamic can permeate cultural systems as a whole or, instead, arise from the dialogical intimacy between a subject and a text (e.g., a chronotopically dense novel)” (Gherlone 2023: 97)

Of course, as we have already noted, instead of leading to transformative change, explosions can be subdued or reified by a dominant actor or narrative that leads to an ‘inauthentic’ explosion. This situation is reflected at an affective level — explosions are not always liberatory, because

“an atmosphere, as we have seen, is able to release enlightening insights into the future but can also drag social actor(s) into a pernicious past, as heavy and unbreathable as the stale air in a room that has been closed for too long.” (2023: 96).

This definition of explosion through the concept of atmosphere aptly captures the way affective traces of past explosions can remain in the semiotic-textual space of the retro text as sediments or deposits. There is also the crucial role of the active participant of the subject who interprets and experiences the explosive event “through their sensory and emotional (as well as cognitive) involvement with the space-time-matter that surrounds and hosts the event, allowing it to happen.” (ibid.). This is why we may refer to the space of explosion as an ‘affective arrangement’ of “persons, things, spaces, discourses, behaviours, expressions and other spatiotemporal matter that coalesces into a coordinated formation (Gherlone 2023: 97-98)”. In some words, the experience of a haunted explosive atmosphere is contingent on the particular arrangement and integration of structures and subjects.

In this chapter, we examined the role of spectres of historical events and processes in the formation of culture. If in Chapter 2 we established the effect of haunting through traces at the intertextual level of the text as well as the haunting by traces of cultural memory in mnemonic texts like retro texts, then in this chapter we have extended hauntology as a framework to the paradigm of culture as a whole. Specifically, we have noted that the unrealised possibilities of major historic events or past ‘explosions’ lay dormant as potential sources for new explosive transformation and dynamism in culture. In this way, we can conceive of retro texts as meta cultural texts that are not just haunted by cultural memory and by the original proto-texts that they conjure, but also reflect and aesthetically represent this haunted cultural history. As echoed by hauntological analyses such as those of Mark Fisher’s (2014), retro pop culture reveals the present as haunted by these abandoned futures of the late 20th century which are embedded in the cultural and aesthetic codes of those times. In the example of *Blinding Lights*, we may say that through the representation of traces of revolutionary cultural events and zeitgeists in the cultural explosions of the 1960’s, 70’s and 80’s, the past unrealised possibilities of social utopias and

cultural transformation that could-have-been are brought back as aesthetically conjured in the present modern meta text. These traces are affective, as we have also established the affective experience of the semiotic explosion as a continuous experience allowing for holistic immersion into culture, shared memory and emotions. The explosive event leaves traces or sediments that can lead to re-interpretation or resurfacing of these explosions through new situated events in the future. Thus, returning to our example, the revolutionary zeitgeists proceeding from the 1968 explosive event produced a historical experience of utopianism, unpredictability and shared social imagination. Although the utopian possibilities presented during this particular semiotic explosion were subsequently abandoned, the affective experience remains as sediments or traces, and their unrealised possibilities remain as potential for sparking new explosions in the future. These traces are conjured in the cultural texts of retro. Thus the traces that are aesthetically represented in the retro texts are not just intertextual traces of original imitated texts, and also traces of cultural memory (as explained in Chapter 2), but also affective traces of the past explosions that are reflected by these texts. In the next chapter, we will explore further the affective experience of haunting that is experienced during the explosion and which is then reproduced in retro.

4. Haunted affective experience of explosion

In the previous chapters, we have ‘reconstructed’ Derrida’s hauntology through its location within a semiotics of culture. We began at the level of the text, to describe how modern meta texts like those of retro aesthetically represent traces of original historical texts along with their past contextual readings that are stored in cultural memory and which open themselves for rediscovery and re-interpretation. We then proceeded to the level of cultural history in order to see what events and processes of history are actually reflected in these meta cultural texts. There, we established that the processes of explosive events in cultural history are reproduced by the haunting effect of past explosions, and the traces of this haunting effect are conjured in the retro texts. We also began identifying how these traces have a fundamental affective dimension, i.e., the explosive events as subjectively experienced are affective atmospheres that leave traces or sediments that can resurface in future explosions and are reproduced in the subject or reader of these reflective meta cultural texts such as retro. The retro text thus ‘encodes’ the affective memory of cultural explosion and makes it available for subsequent re-interpretation and re-living.

In the previous chapters we have discussed hauntology as textual strategy and historical process. We have now reached a point where the framework of hauntology is best suited – i.e., the affective-aesthetic description of the experience of being haunted. It is at this point that we can explore Derrida’s hauntology in depth, in search of metalanguage that can be useful in describing the ethical responsibility and affective experience around the cultural explosion that is reproduced and reflected in the text of retro. In reaching a description of the affective experiencing of haunting, we will be primarily basing our terms in Derrida’s hauntology, but we will be ‘explaining’ hauntology through the framework and precedents set by a semiotics of culture established in the previous chapters.

As we will first see, Derrida’s hauntology adds a critical ethical and political dimension to the subjective position in the explosion. Gayatri Spivak’s depiction of a ‘ghost dance’ aptly captures how conversing and animating (being animated by) ghosts involves a question of conscious and deliberate *praxis*, by making a gap “open in what is merely ‘history,’ and the ghost can dance in the fault.” (Spivak 2013: 329). This ‘ghost dance’ in Spivak’s understanding, is:

“an attempt to establish the ethical relation with history as such, ancestors real or imagined. The ethical is not a problem of knowledge but a problem of relation [...] You crave to let history haunt you as a ghost or ghosts, with the ungraspable incorporation of a ghostly body, and the uncontrollable, sporadic, and unanticipatable periodicity of haunting, in the impossible frame of the absolute chance of the gift of time, if there is any.” (Spivak 2013: 323).

In this sense, the main purpose of the conjuring of ghosts is an ideological strategy — where ghosts do not necessarily have to be ‘real’ in order to have narrative weight that informs social and cultural change. The role of the subject in the conjuring is to give a body (of a text and textual devices) to ‘host’ the ghost, in order to ‘receive’ from them “the absolute chance of the gift of time”, i.e., a world out-of-joint brought back to justice. The explosive atmosphere created by the retrospective text that conjures spectres thus becomes as such a vehicle of corrective social processes. Of course, this ‘ethical’ consideration is not necessarily productive or regressive. Instead, just as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ nostalgia is contingent on the particularities of the subjective reader’s own culture, similarly the conjuring of ghosts may be implicit or explicit and mobilised in different directions based on the interpreter’s own political and ethical position. As we will see, this relates to the ‘visor effect’ of the spectre, in that we are forced to take at face value the ghost of history that appears to haunt us, although this ‘body’ of the ghost can well be manipulated, simulated and mobilised for political or non-political purposes. This is exactly why some texts such as *Blinding Lights* (2019) appear as retrofuturistic to some, political to others, and merely arbitrarily ‘fashionable’ to others.

Thus our focus in this chapter is on an affective experience of haunting described through ethical terms. In this chapter, we will re-visit the process of cultural explosion through the terms of Derrida’s hauntology. Specifically, opening and closing a space of explosion involves a ‘conjuring’ of spectres of history. Retro texts as reflective of explosive histories are involved in this act of conjuring.

As we saw in Chapter 2, the traces of unfinished futures dormant in cultural memory until a particular haunted subject comes along to re-discover and interpret them. This explosive event of discovery is first brought about by the awareness of these unfinished possibilities, which creates the necessary preconditions for a conjuring of those spectres and then a subsequent ‘choice’ to work on the present disjunction. We have in Chapter 3 introduced the process of haunting as aligned with a logic of explosion. The explosive phase can be imagined as a process with 3 analytically distinct phases, as shown in Figure 3:

1. *Conjuring* spectres of unrealised possibilities of abandoned explosions of the past;
2. *Praxis* towards an ethical and responsible fulfilment of the spectre’s injunction; and
3. *Exorcism* of the spectre, mourning its death and forgetting it so as to prevent its further returns

The last stage, i.e. the mourning of the spectre, returns us to the conditions necessary for further hauntings in the future. This relates to the returning to a newly established gradual process from which further explosive departures may be conjured, due to the inevitable unrealised possibilities that were silenced and abandoned in the explosive phase and which may continue to haunt in the future. Thus as we will see, Derrida’s hauntology describes a certain cyclical ‘frequency’ of revolution that reflects the sinusoidal pattern of gradual and explosive processes, involving the *conjuring* of the spectres of past incomplete revolutions, a *praxis* of work to meet their injunction, and their subsequent *exorcism*, ‘abjuration’ or forgetting. These spectres of history return in explosive events which can be described as the moment when the spectre (re)visits us to haunt us. This visitation of the spectre in events occurs in a certain frequency⁷ or frequentation (of revolution), each in different ‘generations’ of ghosts — this is Derrida’s commentary on Marx’s inheritance “from the Hegelian remark on the repetition of history” (2011: 134).

Derrida's hauntology was developed as a response to the questions over the future of forsaken possibilities of social organisation based on Marxist ideas in the post-Soviet Western world. Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (2011) was first formulated as a response to the question ‘Whither

⁷ In fact, the spectre itself as a semiotic mechanism as shown earlier is “the frequency of a certain visibility [...] of the invisible [...] what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and what one projects on an imaginary screen where there is nothing.” (Derrida 2011: 125). When we feel the gaze of the spectre, this is during an event of its visit. “Especially — and this is the event, for the spectre is of the event— it sees us during a *visit*. It (re)pays us a visit [Il nous rend visite]” (ibid.)

Marxism?’ in the context of the fall of the Soviet Union celebrated by many such as Francis Fukuyama as an ‘end of history’ in the triumph of global libertarianism. Derrida’s proposal is that Marx, revolution and indeed this very question and celebration of an (Hegelian) ‘end of history’ has been returning and will return again each time conjured as a spectre that haunts and demands a ‘setting-right’ of an unjust world. Marxism returns as a question in this seemingly new world and relies on memory and history for its articulation— “the more the new erupts in the revolutionary crisis, the more the period is in crisis, the more it is out of joint, then the more one has to convoke the old, ‘borrow’ from it. Inheritance from the ‘spirits of the past’ consists, as always, in borrowing” (Derrida, 2011: 136). We should read Derrida in Lotman’s terms here in that the intrusion of the ‘new’ into the present and the tension it creates that requires a returning to (and of) spectres of the past is exactly the intrusion of the untranslatable that creates the tension necessary for cultural explosions. Hauntology is thus a critical state of being (ontology) that is haunted by unrepresented pasts and futures related to our traumas and failures.

The spectre is deployed by Derrida as a conceptual metaphor for unfulfilled potentialities that 'haunt' the present, but this is a haunting that is concerned with a positive and productive re-structuring of the present in order to provide for a radically new emancipatory future. Thus there is a futural dimension to the haunting— as we will see, the spectre’s ‘injunction’ is to demand justice for a wrong that has been done, and thereby impact the future. This justice is a radical deconstruction of the present, and the spectre demands a productive setting-right of this disjunctive world: it produces the "chance of the future" (Derrida 2011:33). What haunts, then, is the spectre of counterfactual histories, of what-could-have-been, of abandoned futures, of alternative presents. Semiotic haunting demands sociopolitical significance— as Derrida notes, it “is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it [...] in the name of *justice*”. (2011: 11-12, italics added). So hauntology describes a mode of political and social remembering that can mobilise history for praxis in the present in order to construct a radically different social and cultural future.

To live through, interpret and productively work through a successfully explosive event means to be involved in a conjuring of spectres. For Derrida, a conjuration of the spectre, “is first of all an alliance [...] or a conspiracy. It is a matter of neutralizing a hegemony or overturning some

power.” (ibid.: 58). The conjuring takes on the “impossible” task “to speak always of the specter, to speak to the specter, to speak with it, therefore especially to make or to let a spirit speak” (Derrida 2011: 11). For Derrida, this ‘conspiracy’ to conjure the spectre of Marx is an alliance of praxis— the ‘New International’ — and is metaphorised by the tripartite conspiracy that conjures and speaks to the ghost of the murdered King in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The three conjurers are embodied by the characters of Hamlet the haunted son, Horatio the sceptic scholar, and Marcellus the religious soldier. As we will see, these three characters capture the fundamental aspects of the ethical praxis and affectively experienced subjectivity that marks the haunted subject living and working through explosive history. The role of Hamlet more or less aligns with the the condition of being haunted and inheriting the spectre’s injunction (phase 1), Marcellus to the ideological praxis and militant political mobilisation in the ‘work’ required during the choice made to act on the spectre’s injunction (in phase 2), and Horatio’s role is to semiotise or ‘speak’ to the ghost and also to ‘exorcise’ or abjure the ghost in the closing of the explosive phase (phase 3). The simultaneity of all three in the spectre’s conjuring, i.e. in the explosive phase, should remind us that our ‘phases’ of conjuring spectres in the logic of explosion are only analytically separated but in conjoin simultaneously in practice.

Thus through these characters’ roles and subjective experiences in *Hamlet* Derrida’s description of the metaphorical conjuring, abjuration and exorcism of the ghost and the subjective position of choice and inheritance allows us to see how in historical process of cultural explosion, the role of the subject is one endowed with an ethical responsibility and ‘self-awareness’ towards action, but also a certain ‘hesitation’, uncanny and unsettling feelings, and so on. Hauntology thus allows us new dimensions to explore the experience of cultural haunting and explosion, experiences which become represented and reflected in mnemonic meta texts like retro. In the following sections, we will go through the ‘phases’ involved in a conjuring of spectres, that align with the opening, navigation and closing of an explosive phase in cultural history. We will end with a section on the notion of the reproduction and hypervisibility of the spectre in its reproduction, such as in the retro texts we are concerned with.

4.1 Conjuring of spectres and the visor effect

In Chapter 3, we mentioned that a ‘conjuring’ of spectres is the term for the act of opening of an explosive phase in history. The spectre’s ‘visit’ is ushered by a deliberate but clandestine ‘conjuring’ of spectres— i.e. the opening of a space of explosion. The opening of the explosive phase is the conjuring of the ghost, when we become aware of the unrealised possibilities that are haunting the present. At this moment, the gradual process appears to us as split, alienated, out-of-joint. It is in this gap opened up in the present that the spectres of possibilities become (re)presented, and the future opens up as a horizon of choices on which the haunted subject thrown into the explosive phase must choose from.

There is first an element of ‘secrecy’ in the act of conjuring ghosts. Spectres appear only to certain subjects (readers, authors) that are equipped to interpret the particular spectre’s haunting. These subjects “inhabit [the spectre] in a contradictory fashion around a secret” (Derrida 2011: 18). Its secrecy and obscurity is exactly that which provides its power to set right our out-of-joint world — because “if the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause-natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret”. (ibid.2). The abandoned past contextual readings that remain encoded in certain texts and codes have been hidden as traces. So it is the secrecy of the spectre’s injunction that allows for its variance of interpretability, by which some readings can remain implicit and dormant until accessed again.

In order to conjure or recall or summon spectres, we must speak to the ghost first — a minimum memory of the particular languages and codes used in the past is a precursor to the conjurement of the spectre. But to create a revolutionary new cultural phase i.e. a new language and new identity, a state of ‘pre-inheritance’ must be forgotten to naturalise the supposedly spontaneous and immanent generation of the new — we must ‘forget that we have forgotten’ (Lyotard 1984). This is because the “revolutionary inheritance supposes, to be sure, that one ends up forgetting” another spectre — that “of the primitive or mother tongue”. This ‘maternal’ language is “the pre-inheritance on the basis of which one inherits [...]. One must pass [forget] the pre-inheritance, even if it is to parody it, in order to appropriate the life of a new language or make the

revolution.” (Derrida 2011: 137) This simultaneous partial forgetting and remembering of spectres of history is exactly that which grants the spectre’s return its new vitalised “sound” in each coming (ibid.: 16). But these new generations of haunted subjects for whom such spectral haunting resounds as new, i.e. in the “jubilation of youthful enthusiasm”, they appear as “latecomers” to Derrida. (ibid.). For those (including Derrida) who had seen these questions of ‘with Marxism?’ and the End of History posed before, there is something of “discouraging impression of *deja vu*” (ibid.: 17) and a tiresomeness in hearing the same questions again.

During the conjuring, at the opening of the possibility for explosion, the subject first becomes aware of the ‘gaze’ of the spectre. Hauntology importantly offers a description of the feeling precipitated in the haunted subject, the conjurer, of being ‘watched’ by the spectre. This is an unsettling, vague feeling — because we do not see what sees us, due to the semiotic ambivalence and elusiveness of the spectre. Derrida’s spectre is a nebulous indescribable Thing that escapes direct signification. Its presence through the logic of haunting is traced affectively first. When spectres appear, or are conjured, they present themselves as a vague Other that oscillates between presence and absence, and this is of course difficult to describe:

“Here is—or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or any thing, some thing, "this thing," but this thing and not any other, this thing that looks at us, that concerns us [*qui nous regarde*], comes to defy semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy” (Derrida 2011: 5).

We only see this ‘Thing’, this ‘Other’ when it appears in flesh and blood, metaphorised in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* by the armour of the King that the spectre appears in. But he spectre “looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there” (ibid.:6). And “this spectral someone other looks at us, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, *even before and beyond any look on our part*, according to an absolute anteriority and asymmetry, according to an absolutely unmasterable disproportion.” (ibid.:6-7, italics added). The absolute anteriority of the Other produces an affectively experienced ethical imperative, a polemic to respond to its injunction. But when the spectre delivers its injunction, we are blind to the one who actually sees us— this is the ‘visor effect’ (ibid.:7) of the spectre. Using the example of the spectre of law and

governmentality, Derrida speaks of the visor effect “on the basis of which we inherit from the law. Since we do not see the one who sees us, and who makes the law, who delivers the injunction (which is, moreover, a contradictory injunction), since we do not see the one who orders “swear” we cannot identify it in all certainty, we must fall back on its voice.” And so a response to the spectre means “an essentially blind submission to his secret, to the secret of his origin: this is a first obedience to the injunction”, because the spectre can “only be taken at his word” (ibid.) — i.e. the spectre’s injunction can only be taken at face value. We must take the spectre of the dead King in *Hamlet* at his word, because it appears in the King’s armour. This is why the ‘messianic’ quality of the return of the spectre has no identifiable messiah (ibid.: 33) — no content itself or any identifiable body except that which presents itself through the interpretation of the subject (i.e. through the text that reflects the haunting). In fact as in the case of Marxist or religious ideology, the messianic quality itself, the “formal structure of promise” (ibid.: 74) of justice can be separated from the actual current manifestation in contemporary structures of justices of “law or right and even from human rights and an idea of democracy”. This messianic remainder is “the possibility itself of deconstruction [...] a certain *experience* of the emancipatory promise; it is perhaps even the formality of a structural messianism, a messianism without religion, even a messianic without messianism.” (ibid., italics added). There is thus a formal separation of the affective quality of explosive emancipation that the spectre offers from the ‘content’ of the ideological structures that ‘work’ on the spectre’s injunction.

The visor effect is exactly why spectres can be appropriated to different ‘faces’ — ghosts can be ‘impersonated’— when the subject see a spectre — “it may always be a case of still someone else. Another can always lie, he can disguise himself as a ghost, another ghost may also be passing himself off for this one” (ibid.: 7). Derrida’s crucial hint here points out that in our ‘blind submission’ to the injunction of the spectre, there is always the risk that we have been deceived. We can never be sure of its true identity — that is why Derrida critiques Marx’s “patrimonial logic of the generations of ghosts” in that Marx takes on the “difficult and risky” business of separating the “good from the bad ‘ghosts’” (ibid.: 133-134); this is also why Spivak writes that spectres of history themselves may be ‘real or imagined’, but what is important is the experiential position of being haunted and thus the perception of the world through such a logic. In our case of nostalgia in retro, we may similarly state that it is dangerous to discern between essentially

‘good’ or ‘bad’ nostalgia — instead the ethical and affective dimension offered by haunting is always contingent on particular interpretations.

Thus the unrealised possibilities represented by spectres that appear during the explosive event are traced affectively rather than being clearly visible. This is what allows for the variability of interpretation and openness to being instrumentalised in multiple, equally plausible directions. That is to say, there is no clear single univocal or univalent ‘path’ offered by the spectre, instead it depends on the memory and ethical position of the subject that conjures it.

4.2 Praxis of responsible choice to act on the inherited injunction

During the explosive event, the conspiracy that conjures the spectres of history are suddenly presented with the multiple choices related to unrealised possibilities of the past. But we should ask: what does the spectre want, and what is the ethical dimension to the spectre’s injunction?

When speaking to and of the ghost in the name of ‘justice’ , we should consider that the possibilities offered by the spectre’s injunction are those that counter or upset a dominant and repressive hegemony of the present, under which they have been buried — "haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (ibid.:46). The effort of the dominant hegemony in the present , for Derrida, is to mourn them, to repress them, to keep the ghosts dead. But it is important that Derrida’s hauntology is not a specifically articulated counter-hegemonic ideology — instead it is the possibility of possibility itself, revolutionary polemic without ideological content, a ‘messianism’ without a messiah. So haunting in this sense is a *formal* logic of history returning as counter-hegemony into the present.

When we (re)turn to the ‘spectres’ of the past from whom we inherit, we are conscious of a ‘debt’ to them— we are conscious of its injunction and our *obligation* to fulfil it. This debt is to set-right an unjust world. In Derrida’s words, the experience of the inheritance of history that produces the “event-ness of the [explosive] event, the singularity and the alterity of the other” is marked with a quality of ‘messianicity’: “the coming of the other, the absolute and unpredictable singularity of the arrivant as justice” (2011: 33). And the eventness of the (revolutionary) present explosion preserves this quality of messianism of the returning history alongside the “chance of the future” when it begins to take shape in the present “as the thinking of the gift and of

undeconstructible justice” (ibid.). The logic of the gift is important for Derrida when describing the relation of debt between the spectre and the inheritor of history. For Derrida, there are two ‘justices’ — one of the “disjuncture of the unjust [present world] and the one that opens up the infinite asymmetry of the relation to the other, that is to say, the place of justice” (ibid.:26). The first is the repressive justice of present global ideology and follows the logic of “calculable and distributive justice” and “the symmetrizing and synchronic accountability or imputability of subjects and objects” and is limited to “sanctioning, to restituting and to doing right” (ibid.) — this is a justice of reform, such as that of economic and judicial systems. The second justice, that which the messianic spectre demands, follows the “incalculability of the gift and singularity of the an-economic ex-position to others” (ibid.), and this gift of absolute time that “gives jointure” is in Derrida’s reading of Heidegger’s *zugeben* as a gift of surplus — it “indicates addition, even excess, in any case that which is offered in supplement, over and above the market, off trade, without exchange” (ibid.:31). In hauntological terms, “Hamlet is speaking in the [explosive] space opened up by this question— the appeal of the gift, singularity, the coming of the event, the excessive or exceeded relation to the other-when he declares ‘The time is out of joint’” (ibid.: 26).⁸ Here is where Derrida turns on Heidegger’s positing of the future as the “original temporal dimensions from which past and present derive (Monticelli 2008: 16). For Derrida, Heidegger does not escape the “risk of inscribing this whole movement of justice under the sign of presence, be it of the presence to meaning of the *Anwesen*, of the event as coming into presence, of Being as presence joined to itself, of the proper of the other as presence” (Derrida 2011: 32). Instead, in Derrida’s “interpretation of the *Un-Fug*”, “the necessary disjointure, the de-totalizing condition of justice, is indeed justice-as-deconstruction and the logic of absolute gift” is “the very condition of the present and of the presence of the present” (ibid.:32-33)⁹. This second type of justice is one of jointure of the disparate, alienated present of this out-of-joint world. It opposes and deconstructs the first—it is a disjointure of codified or teleological justice-as-law of judicial

⁸ Interestingly, Derrida writes that “this offering is supplementary, but without raising the stakes, although it is necessarily excessive with regard to the giving away or a privation that would separate one from what one might have. The offering consists in leaving: in leaving to the other what properly belongs to him or her” (31) Here is a distinction with the logic of surplus of Baudrillard. Baudrillard’s symbolic exchange operates similarly as absolute gift relation — therefore relation with spectre is relation of justice debt, gift, etc — debt becomes a positive value in sign exchange when trapped or commodified, a positive value in a textual sign system when textualised (elaborated elsewhere, see Murdeshwar 2023)

⁹ See also Thorsteinsson (2015) for a review of Derrida’s disjointure from Heidegger.

or economic systems. Thus this debt towards restoring a ‘justice-to-come’ can be described as that to the absolute justice of the spectres who hold “some promise and therefore some historicity as future-to-come” (ibid.: 92), and those who conjure them are indebted to them to set-right (deconstruct) the disjointed unjust world.

Inheritance of this out-of-joint world and our (re)turning to spectres of the past to ‘borrow’ precedence in seemingly new conditions incurs a debt to the spectres— i.e. our inheritance of an ethical responsibility. In Derrida’s reading of *Hamlet*, the subjective position of the haunted subject is metaphorized first by the character of Hamlet— he is the son of the dead King (Derrida’s metaphor for Marx) who inherits the generational traumas and the injunctions in response to which he ‘must’ choose to act upon history. "One must" choose to meet the spectre’s injunction — “one must filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction.” (ibid.:18)— that is, one must deconstruct our hauntings. Crucially as related to the semiotic explosion, this notion of responsibility endows the choices presented at the bifurcation point of the explosion with an ethical dimension, that is felt affectively by the haunted subject. Here is where deconstruction can not just remain a melancholic “pathology of skepticism” (Fisher 2013) but can offer a route to the dirty business of (ideological) praxis.

The injunction of the spectre is an injunction to rearrange systems of debt that repress the present world. The haunted subject who is an inheritor and debtor — i.e. the subject who is caught in historical crisis and in the problematics of revolution— is always in a position of being indebted in three ways (Derrida, 2011 : 105-117). The first is the debt we owe for our inheritance from the spectre of unfulfilled revolutionary futures (Marx, the dead Father). This is an ‘incalculable’ debt that cannot be tabulated in a ‘static and statistical manner’ . We cannot repay this debt but we are obliged to deconstruct the secret of its origin, ‘the secret of the crime done to its author’. Second, the debt of ‘foreign debt’. By this Derrida means the debt of sign-commodity exchange systems which incur ‘interests’ — in the “interests of capital in general”. This is the systemic debt that has created the world-out-of-joint. “Thirdly, lastly, and consequently,” a debt to re-elaborate political and economic institutions like ‘the State’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘citizenship’. This is only possible through a meeting of the previous two debts.. This is a debt to revisit the ‘Marxian problematics’ because, of course, the spectre of revolution posed to Derrida was the spectre of Marx.

Meeting this debt requires a ‘work’ to be undertaken, i.e. a political mobilisation and an ethical, responsible praxis in the present. This implies taking the ‘messianic’ quality of the spectre at face value and then reconstructing ideological structures of praxis that can inhabit and embody the spectre's injunction. In Derrida's metaphorical tripartite ‘conspiracy’, there is the role of Marcellus, the soldier. For us, Marcellus is the image of praxis, of militancy, that brings into effect the transformation of the real world. Marcellus represents a transformative kind of ‘spirit of work’ that “supposes the spirit of the spirit” (2011: 9), that moves beyond mere empiricism. Entering into dialogue with spectres to deconstruct history involves the militancy of ‘work’— a conjuring requires a working on, an affective transformation of the world. Marcellus is the one who exhorts Horatio to “speak to the ghost”, but he is not an intellectual so he is "mad enough to unlock the possibility of such an address" (2011:13) to and with ghosts, a possibility that scholars do not consider. This militant but ‘ignorant’ character of the haunted subject can be seen as completing the role of forgetting — the true nature of the spectre is obfuscated to Marcellus just as to Horatio, but unlike Horatio he does actually ‘believe’ religiously, i.e., ideologically in ghosts. In a ‘vulgar’ Marxian view, this would be an ideal and abstracted ‘proletarian’ — the one who actually has the power to liberate itself and to set right the ‘foreign debt’ and the debt to rebuild the State. But this proletarian body suffers from the ‘Marcellus complex’, in that due to his ignorance, he presumes that Horatio as a learned scholar can actually speak to ghosts. A lack of positional consciousness due to alienation of labour, produces—

“the illusion, the mystification, or the complex of Marcellus. The latter was perhaps not in a situation to understand that a classical scholar would not be able to speak to the ghost. Marcellus did not know what the Singularity of a position is, let's not call it a class position as one used to say long ago, but the singularity of a place of speech, of a place of experience, and of a link of filiation , places and links from which alone one may address oneself to the ghost” (2011:12).

In fact, it is the naivety of Marcellus that allows for the dialogue necessary in the conjuration of the spectre. Marcellus is a metaphor for the unconscious ‘class’ (but not class) position, containing within it the means for its own emancipation and the ‘working’ on the debt we owe due to the subject's haunting.

However, despite the ethical imperative and praxis of work required, there is also an accompanying feeling of ‘hesitation’ that is experienced at the moment of becoming aware of this responsibility, which aligns well with the notion of ‘undecidability’ experienced during the explosive phase. Hamlet has inherited a disadjusted world, he ‘must’ make a ‘choice’; but Hamlet curses this very responsibility — he “curses the destiny that would precisely have destined him, Hamlet, to do justice” (Derrida 2011:18). Praxis of active, responsible choice at the bifurcation points on the threshold of explosion involves not only chance but conscious choice between multiple alternatives. It involves a ‘decision about the undecidable’ that relies on historical contingencies but “even more on the self-awareness of the people involved “ (Lotman 1990: 233). This choice is located in “a gap in the causal chain” of history which sets a new starting point for linear time at the end of the explosive phase (Monticelli 2008 : 98). What is required is to “open and keep open a space of spectrality, where each fixed meaning and totality are always exposed to insignificance and excess” (Monticelli 2008: 109). It is in this gap where spectres emerge and present their injunction. Likewise, for Derrida — undecidability is the necessary condition for responsible decision (ibid.: 108). There is a gap or deferral of closure during the time being out-of-joint— and this is the ‘messianic hesitation’ (Derrida 2011 : 213), where the subject is thrown into disarray when presented by the impossible choices of action demanded by the spectre of history’s injunction. This hesitation or undecidability marks the affective experience of being haunted, precluding any explosive change and any responsible decision. We may imagine this hesitance as a lack of social impetus or political willpower that is required to break free from the “banal everyday” that our ghosts refuse to “allow us to slip into” (Fisher 2014:30).

Thus we may re-imagine the subjective position in the space of explosion as one that is imbued with a responsibility of choice, and this ethical imperative is experienced affectively. To meet the injunction of the unrealised possibilities offered by the spectres of history, there is required a conscious and responsible praxis — this praxis involves a degree of naive religious belief in the ideology of the spectre, an overcoming of hesitance, and a militant political mobilisation of a social positionality that is repressed under the unjust hegemony against which the spectre preaches its injunction. Through this praxis, there is made a ‘choice’ in the explosion, and a joining of the out-of-joint present.

4.3 Exorcism, mourning and forgetting the ghost

After a ‘choice’ is made between the equally plausible alternatives presented in the explosion, there is required a ‘closing’ of the explosive phase in order to return to linear causal logic of gradual processes of history. In the logic of explosion, this relates to the historian’s retrospective gaze and the attribution of teleological meaning to the explosive event, by which it becomes apparent that the choices made during the explosion are tautological, i.e., the event could not have transpired in any other way than it actually did, and the other counterfactual possibilities that could-have-happened are abandoned. In hauntological terms, this relates to the ‘ontologization’ and stabilisation of the spectres that haunted and produced the explosion. They become no longer spectres of possibilities but historical ‘remains’ that are to be catalogued and studied. In this sense, a return to a gradual process after an explosive process implies a re-establishing of a new social and cultural hegemony that has been put into place after the erstwhile counter-hegemonic haunting has accomplished its disjuncture and re-juncture of the world.

In the conjuration of a spectre, there is the tendency of the conspiracy to speak ‘for’ the spectre, i.e., after the work of the explosive event is completed, there is the need to prevent it from speaking any more so that time may remain back in-joint. This is why conjuring also involves a “‘conjurement’ (Beschworung), namely, the magical exorcism that, on the contrary, tends to expulse the evil spirit which would have been called up or convoked” (Derrida 2011: 58). This means an exorcism of the spectre is *simultaneously* necessary for its summoning —

“to conjure means also to exorcise: to attempt both to destroy and to disavow a malignant, demonized, diabolized force, most often an evil-doing spirit, a specter, a kind of ghost who comes back or who still risks coming back *post mortem*. [...This exorcism...] proceeds by formulae, and sometimes theoretical formulae play this role with an efficacy that is all the greater because they mislead as to their magical nature, their authoritarian dogmatism, *the occult power they share with what they claim to combat.*” (Derrida 2011: 59, italics added).

This work of exorcism is done metaphorically by the character Horatio in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Horatio is the one who is bid by Marcellus to "speak to" the ghost; he is a "skeptic" who has been 'convoked' to "serve as third party and witness" (ibid.: 5). Horatio embodies the role of the scholar:

"[Horatio] enjoins the Thing to speak, he orders it to do so twice in a gesture that is at once imperious and accusing. He orders , he summons at the same time as he conjures ("By heaven I Charge thee speake! speake, speake! I Charge thee, speake!"). And in French, in fact, "I charge thee" is often translated by "je t'en conjure, which indicates a path where [...] injunction [crosses] with conjuration. By charging or conjuring him to speak, Horatio wants to *inspect, stabilize , arrest the specter in its speech.*" (Derrida 2011: 13, italics added).

But in fact, such an impartial and apolitical spectator is the "the last one to whom a specter can appear, address itself, or pay attention [...] As theoreticians or witnesses, spectators, observers, and intellectuals, scholars believe that looking is sufficient. Therefore, they are not always in the most competent position to do what is necessary: speak to the specter." (ibid.: 11).¹⁰ Horatio, the scholar, mourns the dead, i.e. he rationalises and ontologies and writes and reads about spectres. His role in the conjurement of the ghost is to speak and to interrogate the ghost — but he does so without actually 'believing' in ghosts like Marcellus does. This produces the 'complex' of Horatio.¹¹ The work of scholars like Horatio, although essential in such a conspiracy to 'conjure' (entextualise) the spectre, thus is to conjure the 'true' nature of the spectre away by a sort of ontological counter magic. By working to 'inspect, stabilize , arrest the specter in its speech', the role of the scholar is to 'trap' the ghost into the verticality of the palimpsestic historical text, i.e. to speak for and reify the spectre. Derrida describes the work "in analysis [of] this single thing , spirit, or specter" (Derrida 2011: 8-9) as a problematic related to 'mourning', which is an attempt to "ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains

¹⁰ And further accusations — "There has never been a scholar who really, and as scholar, deals with ghosts. A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts-nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal" (Derrida 2011: 12)

¹¹ Derrida only speaks of a complex of Marcellus, but we can also speak of the complex of Horatio — by this we mean the 'pathology' of scepticism (Fisher 2014) and melancholia that pervades the so-called New Left.

and by localizing the dead”. This is a first step of deconstruction — to see that “all ontologization, all semanticization— philosophical, hermeneutical, or psychoanalytical—finds itself caught up in this work of mourning [...] One has to know. One has to know it. One has to have knowledge” (ibid.: 9). Thus all ontology is hauntological — it involves a conjuring of the ghost in order to make it seen, make it present, make it categorised. “Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one has to know who is buried where-and it is necessary (to know-to make certain) that, in what remains of him, he remain there. Let him stay there and move no more!” (ibid.) This of course, is the practice of a positivistic ontology, which the historian puts into practice at and after the close of the explosive space.

The mourning work of Horatio is thus completing the conjuring of the ghost. The purpose of mourning is to stabilise and fix the spectre into the annals of history, so as to prevent its further returns during the newly established gradual process of the present. This is why mourning is accompanied by a ‘forgetting’. After the revolutionary event, “amnesia necessarily sets in” — The anachronic revolution “practices and promises forgetting” (ibid.: 139). There is a difference here between a “positive conjuration” during the opening of the explosion and an effacing conjuring away during its close (139-140). And thus there is produced a certain ‘frequency’ of the returns and forgetting of history — “a revolutionary frequency” of alternating “conjuration and abjuration” of the spectre — a return and then an exorcism or conjuring away. (ibid.). As mentioned earlier, this process aptly relates to the sinusoidal pattern of explosive and gradual processes of history in the semiotics of culture.

However, it is also important to remember that in the selective memory of past explosive processes, i.e. in the ‘mourning’ of the spectres of history, there is always the chance that unrealised possibilities are not fully ‘ontologized’, i.e., they may resurface in the future as haunting possibilities that were briefly forgotten but are recalled again when the time has again come out-of-joint. This is why Mark Fisher thus describes the condition of haunting as “a failed mourning, where we fail to give up on the ghosts, or the ghosts fail to give up on us or allow us to slip into the banal everyday” (Fisher 2014:30).

4.4 Hypervisibility and reproductive simulation of spectres in retro

After having described the process of explosion and its subjective experience and navigation through the terms of hauntology, we may now examine the role of retro texts in this process. As we have noted in previous chapters, retro texts reflect and record the experience of explosive events in history through affective traces of cultural memory. They may be described as a textual practice of ‘mourning’, aligned with the historical textualisation practised by scholars like Horatio during the conjuring away of the spectre. Mourning the spectre implies its stabilisation as a positive indicator of historicity. What was once a vague and explosively ambivalent spectre of possibility is arrested by the historian’s work, and transformed into an opaque value. That is, they capture or ‘trap’ the spectres inside the retrospective text and make it available for reading or consumption by a subject, allowing them to relive the explosion.

There is a distinction here between a conjuring that can truly discourse with spectres to act on their injunction and those historical retrospective texts that conjure spectres simply for aesthetic simulation and replication. This is a distinction “between a parody and a truth [...] there is a thin dividing line between simply ‘mechanically reproducing’ the Spectre of revolution and appropriating it for a responsible use of the setting-right of the world” (Derrida 2011: 136-137). Taken to the extreme, this parodic mode of mechanical reproduction of the spectre can be described as a ‘hypervisibility’ of ghosts, explained below, which has become a dominant mode in postmodern culture, exemplified by retro’s obsession with the past. Spectres in this sense can be simulated, conjured on demand, as part of merely aesthetic veneers on a cultural text that has ‘lost its uncanny charge’ (Fisher 2014: 23).

Derrida in the 1983 film *Ghost Dance* directed by Ken McMullen described the future as ‘belonging to ghosts’. He celebrated the emancipatory and deconstructive potential of the ghost as one that should-have proved to be an anti-hegemonic entity leveraged to disturb, reinvigorate and ‘set-right’ a world that is out of joint. It is curious, then, that today we do really ‘live with ghosts’ but perhaps not in a way Derrida would have hoped. Instead today, ghosts are deployed by consumer marketing infrastructure, through retro-themed pop-culture. Hauntology has become the ubiquitous mode of production of cultural texts across popular media obsessed with retro. Avery Gordon presciently wrote of such a moment — the postmodern contemporary project of

global capitalism which “promotes the telecommunicative visibility—of all codings and decodings [... and which...] means that everything is on view, that everything can be described” is equally ‘antighost’ as its modernist predecessor (Gordon, 2013 : 111). The spectres of radical alterity to the present ideological system have become incorporated by exactly the totalizing semiotic system of value and commodity logic that they haunt. Haunting, or rather, deconstruction, has become haunting-by-design. What Gordon calls ‘hypervisibility’ is the paradoxical ‘hysterical blindness’ to ‘apparition’ characteristic of a neo-positivism of postmodernism. As she writes —

“Hypervisibility is a kind of obscenity of accuracy that abolishes the distinctions between ‘permission and prohibition, presence and absence.’ No shadows, no ghosts. In a culture seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, we are led to believe not only that everything can be seen, but also that everything is available and accessible for our consumption.” (Gordon 2013: 113).

Gordon writes of the parallel here of the hypervisibilisation of ghosts with Baudrillard’s argument that —

“postmodern culture can increasingly bring within view (for consumption) that which previously remained at the margins, but it also reproduces the same features it describes [...] Kept busy just surviving in the confusing supermarket of life, itself already having coded and decoded all exchanges, reification—the effacement of the traces of production—appears, in this milieu, to be the welcome relief one hopes for [...] Hypervisibility is a persistent alibi for the mechanisms that render one invisible” (Gordon 2013: 114).

In Gordon's analysis of Don DeLillo's 1985 novel *White Noise*, which is "a ghost-busting text that refuses to confront what has been rendered spectral by the twin hands of the social and the writer", she points out how the ghosts that haunt 'in the basement' have been completely effaced, and the indifference and the positivistic 'language of power' has exposed and made hypervisible all the secrets of language. Voices that cry out (both living or otherwise) are silenced — and those like the protagonist who catch sight of the 'language of waves and radiation' are possessed with indifference — because "in the end it doesn't matter what they see or think they see" (ibid.:

112-113). The story performs a silencing of ghosts — it "enacts a detour around just those issues of power it aggressively renders explicit". This exclusion, both in the text and through it — is through making a hypervisibility of "technological irrationality", and this hypervisibility is to the "exclusion of a more dialectical way of seeing" — a dialectic "of visibility and invisibility involve a constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows" (ibid.: 113-115).

This omnipresence through simulative reproduction of spectres, and its 'reification' of ghosts, creates a disorienting loss of meaning, recalling Rigney's point that unanimous consensus (in history and memory through cultural texts) is a "road to amnesia" (2008). This causes the narrative and aesthetic elements and traces of haunting in texts to be detached from their haunting, explosive quality, becoming mere positive and opaque indicators of history. This view accommodates, for example, Hietanen et. al. 's (2021) view about the simulated nature and 'absent aesthetic' of retro which proves as an affective excess devoid of any emancipatory meaning. Thus this retrospective imposition of hypervisibility on the ghost is exactly the tendency of the retro text which reflects cultural memory in order for aesthetic and commercial reproduction.

Thus, retro texts play the role of the exorcism of spectres of history, through making them 'hypervisible' in textual representation through arrangement of haunted traces. Retro thus simulates the historical experience of haunting, i.e. by simulating the subjective experience of a conjuring of radical explosive upheaval in social, cultural and political history. In reproducing the spectres of history, retro texts can be described as simulating the experience of radical cultural innovation, i.e., as 'pseudo-new' in Lotman's (2013) description of texts in gradual processes that only appear to be different from the dominant modes of commercial production. These texts are related to the notion of 'inauthentic' or 'fallacious' explosions, in which the spectre of revolution is conjured but without giving any space for its transformative change. Instead of the radical alterity of the spectre of history, we are presented in the retro text with a hypervisible spectre that is trapped within a logic of aesthetic teleology. The spectre is stripped of its ethical and political charge, leaving only affective traces of utopianism that once accompanied its injunction. Thus,

the nostalgia that is evoked by retro is an experience that is simulated, trapped in the text that reflects the haunted nature of culture.

In this chapter, having made a theoretical shift to Derrida's hauntology, we have again revisited the logic of explosion in order to approach an affective-aesthetic understanding of a subject's experience who lives through the explosive phase. Having described the explosion as a speaking-to and speaking-for spectres, we have established the ethical and affective experience of the spectre's conjuring through the framework of hauntology. We may conclude that the process of haunting, conjuring, praxis, exorcism and reproduction of the spectre reflects the 'sinusoidal' dynamics of oblivion and memory in cultural history provided by a semiotics of culture. If explained in Lotmanian terms, we can already see how the metaphor of a conjuring relates to the active subjective position in explosions. At the opening of the explosive phase in Lotman's cultural explosion, there is necessarily a 'choice' made and a forgetting of a 'pre-inheritance' in order to provide the feeling of revolutionary newness. It involves 'forgetting' alternatives that are not taken — and so abandoned to haunt again. And again at the close of the explosive phase, there needs to be a reflective retrospective organisation or entextualisation of the explosive phase into cultural memory. There are always those unrealised meanings and readings of history that are repressed here and this is related to the exorcism and 'abjuration' of the spectre. As an essential part of the resumption of 'gradual processes' of history, forgetting is an essential part of the dynamics of cultural memory. And so the 'revolutionary frequency' in conjuration-to-remember and abjuration-to-forget can be explained through Lotman's dialogically alternating processes of explosive and gradual processes in history. We finally noted the role of the retro text in this process as a practice of mourning after the explosion, through which the spectre is made 'hypervisible', i.e. made stable through a parodic and simulative 'mechanical reproduction'.

Thus, Derrida's hauntology has offered terms to describe the affective experience of the subject of explosion. The traces of memory of this experience of explosion is textualised in the retro text that mourns the bygone historical explosion. The experience of nostalgia in retro, thus, is the simulated experience of that conjuring of ghosts that is reproduced in the reading and

consumption of retro. It would be appropriate to conclude in the final section by revisiting The Weekend's *Blinding Lights* (2019) as an example of retro texts. Below, we conduct a brief textual analysis of this text based on the tools laid out in previous chapters, in order to see how haunting traces of original historical texts and codes along with their past social contexts are revived in its present meta textual formation. It is these effective traces of past explosions that provide the material for the felt nostalgia that is reproduced in the listener or viewer of the song and its music video.

4.5 Example — the hypervisibility of 80's futurism in *Blinding Lights* (2019)

As we mentioned earlier, what is being recalled as a haunting memory today through retro pastiche pop music is the affective atmosphere of a revolutionary zeitgeist in an out-of-joint world proceeding from the explosive moments such as the 1968 French student riots. The cultural explosion, which was concomitant with that era's social utopianism and political upheaval, heralded advances in popular music in genres like psychedelic rock in the 1960's and 1970's, or innovative electronic music genres in the 1970's, 80's and 90's in the UK, Europe and the United States. It is the haunting memory of these past explosions that have been textualised into cultural memory, i.e. the old explosions' subjectively experienced utopianism is conjured by retro which mourns those now closed explosive phases of the past. As we will see, this textualisation happens through an arrangement of trace-elements, each vaguely and hauntingly alluding to their historical progenitors.

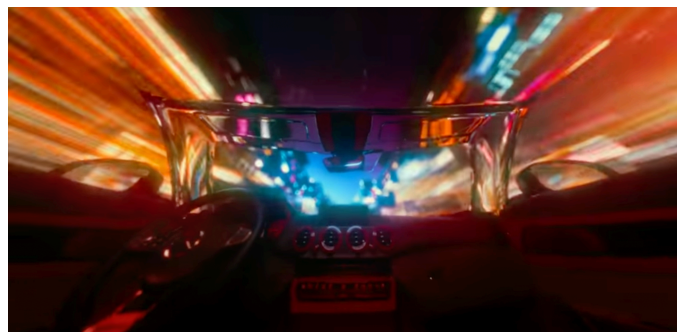


Fig. 4 Stills from the music video of Blinding Lights (2020) by The Weeknd



Fig 5: Still from the music video of Excuses (2020) by Indian duo ‘Intense’ and album Artwork of Future Nostalgia (2020) by Dua Lipa¹². Note the consistency of neon colours and motifs of abstract geometry, acceleration, and themes of the ‘night city’

The ‘dominant’ of *Blinding Lights*, i.e. its 80’s revivalism, is first noticed in its title, which may be a reference to the track *Blinded By The Lights* (1973) by American pop singer Bruce Springsteen, who was immensely influential in the formation of the generic codes of American pop music in the 1980’s¹³. The song overall is constituted by a bittersweet, paradoxical juxtaposition of melancholic brooding and an upbeat mood. This is characterised first by the repetition of familiar and nostalgic drums and bittersweet synthesiser harmonies. Through their semantic simplicity, the energetic drums recall the creative cultural contexts of the 1980’s (traced back to canon-formative proto-tracks such as *Maniac* (1973) by Micheal Sembello, or *Take on Me* (1985) by A-ha) in which radically new yet simple techniques involving electronic drum machines were first introduced to mainstream pop music. The timbre of the harmonic synthesiser sounds recall the once cutting-edge digital synthesisers like the Yamaha DX7 which were made legendary from the 70’s onwards by bands such as Kraftwerk, Tangerine Dream and Daft Punk. The chord sequences move consistently from dark minor chords to brighter major chords,

¹² Dua Lipa 2020. Future Nostalgia [Album]. Warner.

¹³ This “method of pseudonym” is characteristic to “quasi-metatexts” according to Popovic which partially conceal the original source text (1976:228-229). In comparison, there is little formal or aesthetic continuity between this hypothetical proto-text and *Blinding Lights*, which brings up the question why to make the reference at all— perhaps it is exactly because Bruce Springsteen is such a powerful token of the American 70’s and 80’s (Reaganist) dream of (neo-futurist) modernism that is being recalled.

emphasising the constitutive juxtaposition of the song. If the drums and synth parts make *Blinding Lights* a clear reference to the generic tradition of 80's pop and following meta genres, then the song is updated to the 21st century through its clean and slick subharmonic bassline which has become a staple in bass production in modern pop, R&B, hip-hop, etc.

The lyrics of *Blinding Lights* point to a concealed parodic and 'controversial' (Popovic 1976:229) critique of this modernist imagination that has been realised today as a dystopian, alienated and cold world. The catchy chorus may already hint at this controversial reflection — the bright lights of the modernist future have now become blinding and suffocating. The song's narrative is of late-night intoxicated passion that pushes the protagonist to drunk driving in "sin city", i.e. the city of Las Vegas, USA. The first stanza already introduces lyrics describing social alienation, desperate yearning for contact, and a "cold and emptied" metropolis that would uncannily preordain and powerfully resonate with the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. The modern metropolis is a theme in many associated generic spaces. *Blinding Lights* borrows extensively from revivalist generic traditions of 80's-pastiche 'synthwave', 'vaporwave' and 'retrowave' that have been well documented and are topics of current discussion (Ballam-Cross, 2021; Cole, 2020; Rees, 2021; Tanner, 2016). Through visual and sonic structures, these genres heavily aestheticised the modernist dystopia of the 'night city', portrayed in 'cyberpunk' films like *Blade Runner* (1982) and animes such as *Akira* (1989). The critical consensus settles around these revivalist genres' capturing of the utopian impulse of the 1970's neo-futurism through recycled motifs and aesthetics of technological innovation, neo-modernist obsessions with accelerationism and cyber-transhumanism. The narrative story of the music video of *Blinding Lights* also supports the dominant theme of jaded and alienated nostalgia. In the story, the protagonist (played by The Weeknd) wanders and stumbles half-drunk around an emptied Las Vegas, cinematic shots which are connections to movies such as *Joker* (2019)¹⁴. He begins speeding through the city in a sports car, which is referential to other dominant elements and codes in retrofuturist genres, captured in texts like *Drive* (2011). His drunken speeding finally culminates in a presumed violent car crash (Fig.4) , again hinting at a representation of catastrophic obsession with the acceleration and speed of futuristic modernism. Just as the lyrical content is superficially about a toxic romantic

¹⁴ A public comment on the music video on YouTube aptly describes how the protagonist in the music video is a "cross between The Joker and Micheal Jackson. In previous music videos, notably in Can't feel my face (2015), The Weeknd has already explicitly imitated the image of 70's pop icon Micheal Jackson.

pursuit, one scene in the music video portrays the protagonist's wandering into an empty theatre hall (similar to its equivalent nightmarish room in the film *The Shining* (1980)), in which a female performer (who may well be a hallucination or a digitally produced hologram, such as in *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) or in the recreation of popular disco band ABBA's *Voyage* hologram concert tour (2023)) appears on stage as the object of the protagonist's desire (Fig. 4).. Just as he is approaching her, the protagonist in *Blinding Lights* is apprehended by faceless security guards, beaten and thrown out onto the streets; perhaps again a hint towards the brutally repressive world of postmodern capitalist desire.

When viewed as a conceptual whole, the catchiness of the song is elevated by non-musical extra-textual social contexts which surround the song and propelled it to the top of music charts. During the social isolation of the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 and 2021, the opening melody from *Blinding Lights* was included in the music for trending dance challenges on short-form social media platform TikTok and was widely popularised as a content-making activity for families. This, coupled with the fact that people needed comfort music during the precarious times of lockdown, meant that *Blinding Lights* was played throughout the year by major radio stations, fuelling its mass appeal to cross-generational middle class globalised (read: Americanised) audiences. Contrasting with the popular reception of the song, The Weeknd's preceding oeuvre is subversive and 'noire' and has covered a canvas of themes on social alienation, drug abuse, sex, celebrity paparazzi, etc. The rollout of the track was accompanied by the artist's appearance before the media major awards ceremonies and events throughout the year dressed in a Las Vegas themed red jacket that became more disturbingly dishevelled, all contributing to the image of the washed-up rockstar who struggles with fame, substance abuse and alienation; this performance culminating in the album's next released single *Save your tears* (2019). These themes resonate throughout the lyrical content of the enclosing album *After Hours* (2019), particularly noticeable in the preceding track from the album *Faith* (2019), and encourages us to revisit *Blinding Lights*' deeper and darker undertones.

In the above paragraphs, we have shown how intertextual traces can make apparent the links between *Blinding Lights* and a whole host of canonical texts from the retrofuturism genre in pop music, as well as other adjacent texts today. However, this is not just a mere mechanistic

assemblage of traces, because what haunts through these traces is a vague, ambivalent memory of the older social contexts of these borrowed elements i.e. metonymies of the utopian imaginaries that accompany the generic conventions and their original formulations. What is important here is the ‘jaded’, ‘critical’ or ‘controversial’ parodic nostalgia of these meta texts. *Blinding Lights* conjures the 80’s modernist utopia of the ‘night city’, in order to expose its realisation in the 21st century as a dystopian project — emblematised by the cold, alienated, empty sin city.

Thus *Blinding Lights* may be described holistically as participating in a ‘conjuring’ of 80’s explosive futurism. But is this a case of overcoding our text? After all, one would be justified to argue that *Blinding Lights* does not reveal itself to be a critical hauntological text that conjures any spectres, but instead could simply be just a catchy tune to make short-form videos on TikTok, as was the case during its wide popularisation during the social isolation of the Covid-19 lockdown as a casual family activity. In other words, retro may be again reduced to mere ‘fashion’ or ‘nostalgia without pain’. However, we maintain that it is exactly this polysemy and ambivalence which makes retro pop so widely acclaimed and attractive, and nostalgia in retro so elusive and seductive. The spectre remains elusive, confounding attempts to reduce it to any particular interpretation. Depending on the cultural context of the reader, the aesthetics of a particular retro text can become radically political and disruptive, but may equally become banal and ‘hypervisibilised’. In popular culture, the general aesthetic themes used in retro and ‘vaporwave’ can easily be appropriated by different artists in different regions— besides *Blinding Lights* or equivalents like Dua Lipa’s album *Future Nostalgia* (2020), we may compare with examples from distant historical and geographical contexts in which the hauntings of Western European cultural histories may be less politically relevant (c.f. music video of Punjabi pop artist AP Dhillon’s *Excuses* (2020)¹⁵ which imitates The Weeknd’s retro style (see Fig.5); c.f. Estonian comedy-action film *The Dissidents* (2017) which more loosely borrows themes and codes from the general intertextual space of retrofuturism; c.f. the recent musical subgenre of vaporwave called ‘fashwave’ that blends retrofuturistic aesthetics with fascist and white supremacist discourse and symbols). *Blinding Lights* in this sense can be merely an upbeat, familiar pop hit to make TikTok dances to for some, while for others who read deeper into its lyrical content, the

¹⁵ Intense (2020). *Excuses* (Official Video) | AP Dhillon | Gurinder Gill | Intense [Video]. YouTube. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vX2cDW8LUWk>

artist's noir works, and the preceding generic intertextual space it may appear dark, brooding and deeply melancholic. Here we should return to the *contingency* of the distinction between good or bad, retrospective or reflective nostalgia, and Derrida's forewarning against trusting the spectre at face value.

Crucially, however Derrida here points out the interdependence of the 'true' spectre and its simulated 'parody' — they “resemble each other. They contaminate each other sometimes in such a troubling manner, since the simulacrum consists precisely in miming the phantom or in simulating the phantasm of the other” (2011:138). Derrida argues that a balance is required between the two — so “one must remember [revolution] but while forgetting it enough” (ibid.: 137) — a revolutionary praxis must necessarily entail both a remembering and forgetting. This thus reminds us of the necessity of the forgetting of the 'pre-inheritance' on basis of which the injunction of the spectre is inherited. In our interests, we can interpret this as a forewarning that retro texts, despite being 'simulative' reproductions of spectres, still hold within them the germ of the original haunting injunction and its ethical praxis. Just as we cannot fully ascertain the truth of the spectre's injunction, no matter how hypervisible they may have become, so we should imagine an emancipatory haunting emerging even from pop texts like *Blinding Lights*. As mentioned earlier, it is not that nostalgia in retro is essentially 'good' or 'bad' (the identity of ghosts is contingent on their visor effect), but depend on their contextual interpretation. We may thus return to Grainge's (2000) comments that retro points to an awareness and deployment of the textuality of the traces of history, rather than any pre-given notion of a collapse of the future. Hypervisibility itself must be understood as a contingent formation, which arrests and stabilises spectrality but in a way that is not definitive or exhaustive but remains open to future reversals and hauntings.

Conclusion

We began this thesis with identifying hauntology as an appropriate tool to deal with temporally complex, ambivalent nostalgia in retrofuturistic cultural texts. Previous literature has approached hauntology as an effective albeit experimental framework to describe the subjective experience of nostalgia in retro, i.e. nostalgia for unlived memories of an imagined past and its abandoned, counterfactual futures. In the previous chapters, we have ‘reconstructed’ hauntology through the terms of a semiotics of culture. Starting first at the level of the text, we described the semiotic instability of elements in cultural texts and the resulting partial, fragmented, unstable and elusive nature of such aestheticised cultural memory in the text through the notion of haunting trace-elements in retro texts. The retro text so emerged as a haunted textual space populated by spectres of original texts and their cultural contextual readings. Having posited nostalgia in retro as reflecting cultural processes, i.e. retro texts as meta cultural texts, we then examined in Chapter 3 the events of cultural explosion that are textualised in retro. We established that the haunting of unrealised possibilities from previous explosions is exactly that which allows for present explosions to occur, and that the explosive event leaves traces or sediments that can lead to re-interpretation or resurfacing of these explosions through new situated events in the future. The explosion as an affective atmosphere allows us to understand that the traces it leaves behind in cultural memory are those of the subjective experience of the explosion, and these traces are subsequently re-arranged in retro texts. Thus the traces that are aesthetically represented in the retro texts are not just intertextual traces of original imitated texts, and also traces of cultural memory but also affective traces of the past explosions that are reflected by these texts. In Chapter 4, we re-examined the process of explosion through the lens of hauntology in order to locate the ethical, political and affective experience of the haunted subject who conjures spectres of history during the explosion. The retro text emerged as a textual mechanism of the ‘mourning’ of spectres, i.e. a retrospective gaze of past explosions and their unrealised possibilities from a perspective located in the new gradual process of the present. The retro text in postmodern culture participates in a simulative mechanical reproduction of spectres of history in order to make them ‘hypervisible’. The retro text thus finally settles in our understanding as one that is produced by and reproducing the dynamics of cultural history, and which textualises the affective traces of cultural memory of the subjective experience of past cultural explosions. Thus new

readers and consumers of retro texts are able to access this cultural memory of explosions as traces, simulated and reproduced in retro. In this context, we can now understand better the question posed by the comments on the music video of *Blinding Lights*, about nostalgia for a time never actually personally lived through but accessed through spectral traces in cultural memory.

Our efforts in this thesis are thus towards an alternate, transdisciplinary approach to nostalgia. Instead of beginning first at a phenomenological or psychological level, we have taken the textual process of cultural memory as our basis for an understanding of the affective experience of historic processes and events that are reflected in retro texts and made available for reading and consumption. We have thus posited that cultural systems and historic systemic development are not just mechanistic but affective, and leave traces of social contexts and experienced subjectivity in shared memory which can be accessed by future generations.

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Kokkuvõte

Nostalgia retrokultuuris: tontoloogilise semiootika poole

Retrotemaatika on tänapäeval muutunud üle maailma populaarseks. Retrotekstides esile kutsutud nostalgia ei mahu traditsiooniliste nostalgia määratluste alla, kuna see ei ole siin enam igatsus tegeliku koha ega ka läbielatud ja mäletatud aja järele. Siin igatsetakse kujuteldavat minevikku, mis pakuks radikaalset alternatiivi olevikumaailmale, mis on võõrandunud ning liigestest lahti. Jacques Derrida tontoloogia pakkus töös eksperimentaalse, kuid tõhusa esteetilis-afektiivse raamistu, mille alusel selgitada, kuidas ajaloo tondid (spectres) „naasevad“ olevikku ning meid „kummitama“ asuvad, tuletades meile meelde hüljatud utoopilisi projekte. Siiski tuleks tontoloogiale kasuks, kui ta asetada kultuurisemiootika konteksti. Sel eesmärgil esitas magistritöö järgmised uurimisküsimused: 1) Kuidas representeeritakse esteetiliselt kummitatud tekstis „jälgede“ kaudu kummitavat agent'i nimega kultuurimälu? 2) Mille kohta käib tekstis tondina representeeritud kummitav mälu? Kui praegust kultuurikonteksti ennast „kummitatakse“, siis millised on need hüljatud tulevikud ja kontrafaktuaalsed ajalood, mis teda kummitavad? 3) Milline on nende tontide revolutsioonilise „väljakutsumise“ afektiivne kogemus, eriti seoses eetilise ja poliitilise ajaloo praksis'ega, mida taastoodab retrotekst?

Töö asetab tontoloogia kultuurisemiootika raamistusse, kus see rekonstrueeritakse. Sedasi lähenetakse nostalgia probleemile seoses retroga kolmel tasandil: 1) tekstilised operatsioonid; 2) kultuuri ajalugu; 3) subjektiivne kogemus. Magistritöö ehitub mõistete tontoloogia ja semiootiline plahvatus ühendusele. Seega panustatakse semiootikasse, tuues viimasesse sisse tontoloogiale omased poliitilised, eetilised ja poleemilised küsimused. Ses ristumiskohas saab mõistetavaks, kuidas kontrafaktuaalsed tulevikud – mis võinuks olla – meid olevikus kummitavad ning sedasi avavad võimaluse radikaalseks ja plahvatuslikuks kultuuriliseks muutuseks. Töö järelduseks on, et retrotekstid estetiseerivad mälestuse varasemate revolutsiooniliste aegade kogemusest. Nii teevad nad selle kogemuse kättesaadavaks uutele põlvvedele, kes ei ole neid sündmusi küll läbi elanud, kuid saavad neid ometi kummituslike jälgede kaudu afektiivselt kogeda.

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