

A hauntology of the 'American Nineties'. Reenchanted imaginaries in the shadow of two deaths

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Abstract

The concept of the shadow embodies an inherent ambivalence, encompassing both darkness and light, a duality mirrored in 1990s—a decade marked by hope and disillusionment, anxiety and carefreeness. These contrasting elements, particularly in the U.S., shaped and were shaped, by the shadows cast by two defining traumatic events: the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, and the attacks on September 11, 2001. As Philip E. Wegner terms it, the 1990s represented “life between two deaths”, a period marked by the emergence of reenchanted imaginaries and new cultures and narratives of un/belief that were more complex and nuanced—more *umbratile*—than any one-way interpretation. The article will employ Derrida’s and Fisher’s complementary concepts of hauntology to analyze the cultural landscape of the 1990s, delineating a profile of a decade in American culture. This profile can only be fully understood when viewed through the liminal spaces between its opposing trends, perpetually caught in contrasting and shadowy imaginaries and narratives.

Keywords

Hauntology | 1990s | Reenchantment | Popular Culture | Narratives

1. I'll see you again in 25 years. Meanwhile

If there is one pop-cultural text that fully embodies the hauntological dimension of the American 1990s, it is likely David Lynch and Mark Frost's *Twin Peaks*. With spectrality and strange temporality among its most characteristic features and its haunt-ing/-ological mantra "I'll see you again in 25 years", *Twin Peaks* captured the eerie interplay of presence and absence, past and future, that defines both the concept of hauntology and a peculiar, liminal decade like the 1990s. It seems thus all the more fitting that *Twin Peaks* premiered on April 8, 1990, a full three years before the question "Whither Marxism?" would guide the conference at the University of California, during which Jacques Derrida would first introduce the concept of hauntology with its *Specters of Marx* (1994). What could be more hauntological than existing before the very concept of hauntology was even coined?

If this observation may seem like little more than a fascinating suggestion, applicable to other texts from different periods, it remains true that, as noted, "What makes *Twin Peaks* such a compelling program is that it continuously forces the viewer to question what is occurring on-screen while simultaneously refusing to answer these same questions" (MacLeod, 2018: 62). It is thus in this sense that *Twin Peaks* emerges as the epitome of the 'American Nineties' and their hauntological quality.

During this decade, the nature of reality itself became a matter of debate and interpretation, emerging as "a babel of contesting narratives" (Palmer, 2009: xi) and "a source of anxiety and suspicion" (Last, 2015: 3). Knowing too much while not knowing anything for sure was the leitmotif of the 1990s, marked by the emergence of new approaches to grappling with ultimate meaning in a time characterized by a profound shift in how reality was experienced, and information was accessed and absorbed. The 1990s saw the peculiar combination of sudden, exponential increase in the number of pieces of information available and the lack of mechanisms to process and memorize them. This resulted in the simultaneous collapse of polar opposites, such as real versus illusory, signaling "a fundamental mutation in the structure of reality itself" (Laist, 2015: 2).

Amidst phenomena that pushed the boundaries and definitions of known reality—including the growth of both globalization and counter-globalization movements, the explosion of communication and information technology, and the increasing influence of the media and entertainment industry—narratives about enchantment and the search for ultimate meaning, whether religious, spiritual, or even conspiratorial, flourished. The 1990s saw a shift from modernist master narratives of disenchantment to postmodern fragmented narratives of reenchantment. McClure identified the late 1980s and early 1990s as a "turbulent situation of spiritual engagement, uncertainty, and experimentation" that saw a resurgence of "spiritual energies, discourses, and commitments" manifesting across a wide array of cultural products, from literature to fashion, cinema to TV (McClure, 1995: 142-143). Yet these reenchanting imaginaries were more complex and



nuanced—more *umbratile*— than any one-way interpretation usually used to describe them, ranging from ‘the return of religion’ to mere conspiratorial thinking.

As Marzo and Mori note, social imaginaries can be understood through Plato’s myth of the cave: “the prisoner who escapes from the cave becomes the agent of change, disrupting the reality shaped by the dominant imaginary and constructing a new one in the light of a fresh imaginary. It is through this perpetual cycle of change that the infinite variability of historical-social realities takes shape” (2019: 23). Cultural products often resemble those prisoners who make a leap forward, and through them, we can discern shifts in social imaginaries and the broader social world. Social imaginaries, being historically rooted in specific contexts of time, space, and culture (Taylor, 2002), are “the invisible part of the visible”, imbuing it with meaning through “various levels of ever-deeper signification, invisible indeed” (Secondulfo, 2019: 8).

To fully understand how they construct meaning and shape the transformations of the visible world and societies, “the map and content” of these invisible layers must be uncovered (Secondulfo, 2019: 8).

The article will employ Derrida’s and Fisher’s complementary concepts of hauntology to analyze the 1990s, aiming to delineate the cultural profile of a decade in American culture. This profile can only be fully comprehended when considered within the liminal spaces between opposing trends such as hope and disillusionment, irony and anxiety—a decade thus constantly caught in contrasting and shadowy imaginaries and narratives. Hauntology thus provides a fitting framework for examining a decade, through its cultural products, that is fundamentally constructed on shadows.

If hauntology views events and ideas as suspended in a temporality that tends to fade, what happens in that “Meanwhile”, which Laura Palmer—both ghost and specter—leaves unsaid in her conversation with Agent Cooper in the Black Lodge, following that iconic statement, “I’ll see you again in 25 years”? It is indeed in that ‘meanwhile’ that *the 1990s* took place and *The Nineties* came to be—not merely a suspension or a wait, but a time in its own right, full of contrasting voids of nostalgia and anticipation, hope and anxiety. These voids were far from being *vacui* or shallow and superficial—postmodern in the most detrimental meaning sometimes attached to the term. Instead, they were the living embodiment of the uncertainties that characterized the decade. Laura Palmer was for Cooper a ghost, an undead presence haunting him from beyond, yet she was always a specter: the anticipation of an absence that would haunt him, the people of Twin Peaks, and the audience for 25 years—the absence of answers, resolution, and closure. This haunting absence became constitutive of the experience of living through the 1990s.

2. Living in the shadow of two deaths

The concept of the shadow carries an inherent ambivalence, embodying both darkness and light, mirroring the fundamental duality of life and death. This duality becomes a powerful lens through which to interpret the 1990s, a decade marked by



a profound tension between hope and disillusionment, between carefree optimism and looming anxiety. Such a dynamic balance—or imbalance—was not merely an abstract condition but one deeply shaped by two traumatic events in the history of (not only) the United States: the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In many ways, these events cast long shadows over the decade, with their significance reverberating across the cultural and psychological landscapes of the time. The fall of the Berlin Wall symbolized the end of the Cold War, which for decades had offered a sense of moral clarity and ideological purpose for the U.S. (Laist, 2015). Its collapse, while celebrated as the triumph of liberal democracy, also ushered in a period of profound uncertainty and existential questioning.

As Philip E. Wegner (2009) aptly describes, the 1990s represented “life between two deaths”—a liminal period bookended by the collapse of the Cold War order and the harrowing onset of the War on Terror. In this space between, the disintegration of the binary world of East vs. West left many Americans grappling with a newly fractured sense of identity and purpose. This shifting landscape forced a reevaluation of long-held beliefs, thrusting the U.S. into an uncertain terrain where old ideological certainties no longer held sway. What had once been framed as a moral struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ was now replaced by a more ambiguous and fragmented geopolitical reality.¹

The immediate response to the post-Cold War landscape was marked by what felt like a collective sigh of relief—an exhalation, what some called “a holiday from history”, much more than the end of it (Will 2001). As George F. Will remarked, the 1990s were seen by many as a reprieve, a time when the existential threats of nuclear annihilation had receded, allowing for a period of apparent peace and prosperity. Similarly, David Halberstam (2001) referred to it as “a time of trivial pursuits”, where the pressing concerns of global warfare were replaced by a focus on consumer culture, entertainment, and the burgeoning digital revolution. Yet this surface-level carefreeness masked a deeper, more pervasive undercurrent of anxiety. The cultural productions of the decade—whether in film, television, or music— frequently revealed a society grappling with its sense of identity and purpose in a post-11/9, pre-9/11 world.

The ambivalence inherent in this period is where the metaphor of the shadow finds its deepest resonance. While the end of the Cold War sparked hope for a more stable world, it also gave rise to a growing sense of disillusionment as the predicted “end of history” failed to materialize (Fukuyama, 1989). Instead, the world became more unpredictable, and new forms of conflict and unrest began to emerge. The

¹ Wegner's concept of “life between two deaths” provides a crucial framework for understanding the 1990s, particularly in the U.S. context. His analysis places the decade within a broader cultural context shaped by key theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Walter Benjamin. Wegner draws on Jameson's focus on periodization to interpret the 1990s as a distinct cultural era, defined by its unique political, cultural, and economic conditions. Jameson's critique of late capitalism and its effects on culture highlights the growing disillusionment of the time and the commodification of everyday life. Benjamin, meanwhile, informs Wegner's approach to memory and historical fragments, emphasizing the past not as a coherent narrative but as something that erupts into the present, always fragmented and incomplete.



technological advancements and economic booms of the era could not fully erase the existential uncertainties that lingered beneath the surface—sometimes even becoming part of them, as seen with Y2K.

This ambivalence fueled a cultural fascination with themes of fragmentation, identity crisis, and the search for meaning. Popular culture during the 1990s became a space where these tensions were explored and, to some degree, worked through.

From the rise of alternative music and grunge, with its emphasis on disillusionment and rebellion, to television shows like *The X-Files* and *Twin Peaks*, which delved into conspiracy theories and the uncanny, the decade was saturated with attempts to grapple with the shadows of a shifting order.

The quest to navigate this altered landscape, with its eroding certainties, became one of the defining themes of the 1990s. As the decade wore on, the cracks in the façade of the so-called “holiday from history” began to show, and the ambivalence of the shadow came to the fore. The growing tensions surrounding globalization, the rise of terrorism, and the intensification of culture wars suggested that the light cast by the end of the Cold War had also created new, darker shadows that would continue to haunt the American psyche into the 21st century.

If, as Lyotard posited, in a postmodern contexts incredulity was the norm and consensus a “horizon never reached” (1984: 61), the Cold War and its narratives were merely “the last curtain to fall on an era” whose “grand ideologies, mythologies, and meta-narratives capable of unifying communities of people” were already gone (Arras 2018: 19). In this sense, the 1990s became a decade where unresolved tensions of the past collided with the uncertain possibilities of the future, raising haunting questions about identity, meaning, and morality in a world where not only known realities had seemingly disappeared, but also shared imaginaries were shifting, changing, and morphing in unpredictable ways.

Thus, the 1990s emerge as a true liminal space, a haunted terrain caught between two deaths and between two hauntological frameworks. The shadows that shaped this decade were cast not only by the remnants of Cold War ideologies but also by the failure of a utopian future to materialize. More than ever, the 1990s can be understood as a time of haunted ambivalence—a ‘shadowland’ where past and future collide in a disjointed yet deeply interconnected manner. The result is a decade defined by its shadows, where the interplay between presence and absence, certainty and ambiguity, leaves a legacy that continues to reverberate in contemporary culture.

3. L’Amerique, mais c’est l’hauntologie

While Wegner only briefly references Derrida’s concept of hauntology, it is indeed crucial for understanding the 1990s. The decade— and this is a key point in the present analysis—occupies a space between Derrida’s original notion of hauntology and Mark Fisher’s later adaptation of the concept. Derrida’s hauntology focuses on the spectral presence of the past within the present, highlighting how historical



traumas and political ideologies continue to irrupt into and haunt the present. Fisher, in contrast, shifts the focus to the future's role in haunting the present, emphasizing the missed opportunities and broken promises of neoliberalism and late capitalism.

He explores the spectral nature of a deferred or foreclosed future, which was promised but never fully realized.

The American Nineties are caught in this liminal space, haunted by the spectral remnants of Cold War ideologies while simultaneously overshadowed by the eerie incumbency of a future that was once heralded as the "end of history" but soon became fraught with an incumbent 'history' embodied by the new millennium. In Derrida, hauntology contrasts with ontology, which thinks of being in terms of a self-identical presence. For Derrida, ontology is shadowed by a state of non-being: "To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time" (1994: 161). Hauntology is then "that eerie zone where time collapses and our past [...] haunt(s) our minds" (Macintyre 2022) as the specter "cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*" (Hägglund, 2008: 82).

Fisher expands on this by incorporating the concept of the 'slow cancellation of the future', which he links to cultural stagnation, particularly in music and film, revolving around recycled ideas, repurposing, and nostalgia. Fisher's focus is on what haunts "the digital cul-de-sacs of the twenty-first century", which for him are "all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate" (Fisher, 2012: 16) The disappearance of the future, he argues, signifies the deterioration of a social imagination that once allowed us to conceive of a radically different world. Fisher emphasizes that nothing enjoys a purely positive existence; everything that exists is based on absences that surround it.

In this context, the 1990s, even though they likely contributed to the cultural status Fisher describes, represented a complex and nuanced time—"out of joint" yet full of "immense historical possibilities" (Wegner, 2009: 2). Central to Derrida's idea of hauntology is a fractured sense of time—an understanding that time is not as it ought to be, encapsulated in *Hamlet's* famous line, "the time is out of joint", which Derrida often echoed. This disruption manifests as a time that is fractured by the past, severed from the future, and folds back upon itself. Hauntology, with its rethinking of time, is particularly well-suited for analyzing the cultural milieu of such a defining decade. By invoking the ghost, hauntology exposes how spectral presences persist in the absence of the material, sometimes becoming more real than their physical counterparts.

4. Enchanted disjointments, disjointed enchantments

As Jameson observed by the mid-1990s, Derrida's concept of hauntology was not about literal ghosts or the past being "alive", but rather about recognizing that "the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be" (1995: 99). We "would do



well not to count on its density and solidity”, Jameson noted, emphasizing how the repression of history in postmodernity—or late capitalism—had created a world where the past, history, and “narrative itself (grand or not)” had been obscured (1995: 99). Jameson’s observation of the waning of historicity in postmodern culture—where historical narratives collapse into simulacra and pastiche, leaving behind a cultural field haunted by the echoes of an irretrievable past—aligns deeply with Derrida’s concept of the specter (1991). The collapse of historical depth, where history is no longer experienced directly but through fragmented, commodified images, underscores the disjointed ways in which the past irrupts into the present.

Both Jameson and Derrida emphasize the disruption of linear temporality, revealing how the past persists as a spectral presence, resisting closure and clear boundaries. The ‘appearance of the ghost’, therefore, signals the need for a revision of the past, the creation of new narratives. Yet, this process is not a return to enchantment but rather a hauntological reworking of what has been lost, leaving the present haunted by absences, fragments, and debris.

The reenchantment of the 1990s was thus not a simple return to wonder but a fragmented, disjointed effort to reweave meaning amidst the cracks of modernity.

A modernity that had promised rational clarity but often delivered alienation and disenchantment. These disjointments opened new possibilities, particularly through subcultures, alternative spiritualities, and reimagined forms of knowledge thriving at the margins of dominant rationalist and capitalist structures.

Sociologist Wade Clark Roof noted that spiritual quests of the 1990s shifted from dogmatic belief to personal experience, emphasizing exploration over certainty and focusing on personal meaning and social belonging (1996). This search was often disjointed, emerging from a landscape where traditional sources of meaning were increasingly questioned, but the desire for transcendence, belonging, and enchantment persisted. As Hill documents, a 2001 Gallup survey found that 55% of respondents believed in “psychic or spiritual healing, or the power of the human mind to heal the body” (2010: 7). Furthermore, she adds, the National Science Foundation reported that 40% of Americans used alternative therapies in the 1990s, reflecting a 50% increase in related expenditures over five years (Hill, 2010: 7).

In this context, reenchantment emerged within the gaps left by what was presumed to be a linear and final disenchantment, challenging the dominant narrative of rationalization. However, as Gauthier (2013) points out, if reenchantment presupposes a prior disenchantment to overcome, it actually operates on the margins of a still largely disenchanted modernity, which continues to prioritize rationality, technology, and capitalism. This marginal reenchantment arises in the “cracks” of modern rationalization—art, popular culture, conspiracy theories, and alternative spiritualities—where the supposedly irrational resurfaces. The disjointments of modern life do not eliminate enchantment; they create new spaces for its resurgence in unpredictable forms.

Partridge further connects hauntology and reenchantment, noting that hauntology reveals “an essential unknowing which underlies and may undermine what we think we know” and “undermines the stability and certainties of modernity”



(2016: 317). This element of uncertainty is key to why the language of ghosts, specters, and hauntings resonates so powerfully in late modern culture. Just as hauntology evokes the eerie sense of something missing, reenchantment hints at an enchanted world beneath the surface, a world not bound by the external authorities of science or institutionalized religion. In both cases, what emerges is a liminal space—neither fully rational nor entirely magical—where new narratives of belief, doubt, and possibility take shape.

In this sense, we can speak of *enchanted disjointments* and *disjointed enchantments* in relation to American social imaginaries in the 1990s. If 'enchantment' evokes wonder, spirituality, and a connection to the transcendent, 'disjointment' implies fragmentation and disconnection in experience and perception. Together, these terms capture the complexities of navigating a world that can be both awe-inspiring and alienating—marked by the acceleration of second modernity and its irruption in everyday lives, characterized by rapid technological advancements and shifting cultural paradigms.

Zygmunt Bauman described the postmodern moment as a resurgence of both sacred and secular narratives, previously subdued by Western rationalism and the rationalization of religion, signifying "a reenchantment of the world that modernity tried hard to disenchant", particularly by reclaiming "the right to pronounce on meanings, to construe narratives" (1992: x). Narrative practices—the stories people tell themselves about their own lives—provide a crucial link between social imaginaries and cultural values as a system, on the one hand, and cultural expressions and everyday practices, on the other. By articulating personal and collective experiences, people construct meaning, challenge dominant narratives, and negotiate their identities within broader cultural frameworks. Thus, narrative practices emerge as an essential arena for meaning-making, enabling both personal reflection and collective understanding in an era characterized by uncertainty and transformation.

In this sense, the reenchanting narratives of the postmodern era did not, as Partridge notes, signify a "return to previous ways of being religious" (2008: 46).

Rather, they marked the emergence of new ways of understanding, interpreting, and 'living' that enchantment—not "a modern reconstruction of the enchanted landscape of the past, but new growth in a secularized, globalized, technologically sophisticated, consumer-oriented landscape" (2008:60). The postmodern ethos of the 1990s brought about a significant shift in cultural values, characterized by a deep skepticism toward established religious narratives and a move away from absolute truths, embracing instead a fragmented view of reality. Popular culture became a central force in this process of reenchantment, acting "both an expression of the cultural milieu from which it emerges and formative of that culture" (2008: 53).



5. Shadowy, reenacted, and haunted: the imaginaries of the American Nineties

Annette Hill noted in 2001 that the resurgence of paranormal beliefs in the previous decade provided “momentum to representations of ghosts, supernaturalism, angels, and fringe science across multimedia environments” (2010: 7). While this observation certainly holds true and relates to our discussion, it represents only a fragment of a broader phenomenon that emerged within a specific context.

Notwithstanding the proclamations about the end of history—or perhaps precisely because of them—a renewed interest in history emerged in the U.S. during the 1990s. Vivian Sobchack, in her introduction to *The Persistence of History*—a volume that extensively explores this issue and in which we can find the famous Hayden White essay on the modernist event—highlighted the curious moment when history, purportedly in its final chapter, became a site of unprecedented public attention and cultural contestation (1996). This renewed engagement with history wasn't rooted in conventional historicism but rather filtered through the postmodern lens, often with a sense of irony or nostalgia. Films like *Forrest Gump* (1994), with its playful, postmodern re-envisioning of historical events, epitomized this trend.

The rise of the History Channel, whose tagline promised audiences a “second chance” to experience historical events they “missed”, further exemplified how media in the 1990s commodified history as both entertainment and a means of creating a collective memory (1996: 3-4).

This media-mediated historical consciousness was intensified by real-time historical events that unfolded through the lens of mass media, most notably the Rodney King beating, the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and the O.J. Simpson trial. These televised ‘spectacles’ became media events, where the boundary between lived experience and its historical representation blurred. As Sobchack observed, people in the 1990s began to carry themselves with a phenomenological reflexivity “toward their ‘immediate’ immersion in the present, self-consciously grasping their own objective posture with an eye to its imminent future possibilities for representation” (1996: 4) as the historical past—a past commodified and replayed endlessly on VCRs or in the burgeoning 24-hour news cycle.

It is no coincidence that the two defining events of the decade, 11/9 and 9/11, were both, although in dramatically different contexts, televised and experienced by audiences from their couches, streets, or bars—and subsequently rewatched countless times.

The VCR, itself a haunting emblem of late 1980s and early 1990s technology, symbolized a new form of agency over the consumption of cultural products, thus reverberating on the effect of that consumption on the personal experiences and collective imaginaries. For the first time, viewers could record, replay, and pause events, exerting control over their interaction with media. Yet, this control also fragmented the experience of reality, dissociating the live event from its reception. This phenomenon aligns with contemporary Baudrillard's assertion that the Gulf War



was something that “never happened”—not in the sense of denying its material existence, but rather in the idea that the war, as experienced by the public, was fully mediated and pre-packaged, devoid of raw, unmediated reality. In this sense, the 1990s offered a unique relationship between media, history, and reality, one haunted by a growing disjunction between events as they occurred and how they were consumed and remembered. Media events began to shape reality in ways that turned the quotidian into history before it had even settled into the past.

The media-driven historical consciousness operated in the cracks between reality and representation, between the event and its endless replays (Biano, 2022). The era was haunted by its own immediacy, by the inability to fully grasp the present without it being refracted through the commodifying gaze of media.

This is a crucial aspect for understanding the context in which those enchanted fragments emerged from the fissures of modernity. An interesting case that brings together the shift in social imaginaries, pop culture, and the complicated relationship with history and reality is the so called Mandela Effect, deeply rooted in the 1990s milieu. The Mandela Effect refers to a phenomenon in which a large group of people remembers an event or detail differently from how it actually occurred, often involving celebrities, pop-cultural phenomena, or significant events. Coined by Fiona Broome in 2009, the term refers to a seemingly common error in the memory of many Americans at the beginning of the new century: the belief that Nelson Mandela died in prison during the late 1980s, along with the memory of having watched his funeral on television.

The Mandela Effect represents a mass phenomenon that evokes a sense of mystery and wonder, but one that is rooted in the very uncertainties created by a hyperconnected yet disoriented digital landscape. As Chuck Klosterman notes, “The subsistence and mass identification of phenomena like the Mandela Effect could only come to fruition in the Internet Age [...] Yet the content of the Mandela Effect—the objects and ideas that people misremember—is almost entirely tied to the era just before the internet became common”, when it was harder to prove what was true and disprove what was false (2022: 6). This collective misremembering of events illustrates how the 1990s left a trail of fragmented memories, lingering on the edge of consciousness, where the real and its mediated counterpart began to blend in unsettling ways.

This tension between personal and collective memory wasn't only present in public phenomena like the Mandela Effect. It was also a central theme in popular 1990s TV. As noted by Hansen, shows like *Twin Peaks*, *Northern Exposure*, and *The X-Files* used memory, visions, and dreams to blur the lines between reality and the surreal, reflecting broader cultural anxieties tied to forgotten and contested pasts (2013: 141). These series portrayed memory not as a fixed archive but as a living, dynamic field where the forgotten or the repressed could irrupt into the present. By exploring the personal hauntings of their protagonists and their struggles with the past, these shows, argues Hansen, resonates with Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory. This distinction, rooted in Maurice Halbwachs's foundational concept of collective memory, underscores how memory operates on



two levels: the everyday, interpersonal transmission of the recent past and the more enduring frameworks of cultural narratives and traditions. Furthermore, adds Hansen, these themes align with Carl Jung's ideas on shadow, doubling, and the unrealized potential of imagination within Western modernity (2013: 142).

In these shows, the exploration of memory serves as a way to negotiate the complexities of American identity at a time when the boundaries between the real and the supernatural were perceived as increasingly porous. This negotiation—between memory and reality, between the personal and the collective—mirrors another theme that runs throughout 1990s narratives: the nature of truth and reality itself, epitomized in cultural products like *The Matrix* and *The X-Files*. These narratives captured the era's deep distrust of authority and obsession with hidden truths by constantly questioning reality through themes of government conspiracies and alien encounters. *The Matrix* (1999), which presents a dystopian world where reality itself is an illusion, encapsulates the 1990s' crisis of ontology: how do we know what is real in an era where truth is increasingly mediated by technology and media? This crisis of reality is, in itself, ghostly—the world presented to the characters (and the audience) is a mere shadow of what is real, reflecting a broader cultural anxiety about the nature of truth and authenticity in the digital age.

Yet, while these narratives explored darker anxieties about truth and reality, others offered a different vision of modernity—one that embraced the supernatural and spiritual, often in unexpected ways. In the 1990s, technopagans—somewhat drawing on earlier strands of 1980s cyberpunk—emerged as a fascinating example of postmodern reenchantment, blending ancient spiritual practices with cutting-edge technology. Technopagans represent a powerful example of reenchantment that is neither a relic of the past nor a simple revival of old spiritual traditions. Instead, they embody a fully postmodern and hauntological collision between the past and present, where modern technology intertwines with ancient, traditional, and historical forms of mysticism. These practices were not about nostalgically clinging to bygone beliefs but about reshaping them in contemporary contexts—creating something entirely new while remaining haunted by echoes of the past. The 'ghosts' of technopaganism are not historical relics but rather symbolic fragments of ancient spiritual ideas, reshaped and recontextualized through modern technological lenses. In this way, the past does not appear as a fully realized remnant, but as a set of ideas and practices that can be transformed and hybridized in the present.

Technopagans used modern technology—particularly the internet—not merely for communication or information sharing but as a space for spiritual exploration (Evolvi, 2021). For these practitioners, the internet was more than just a tool for connection or entertainment; it became a sacred space, a digital realm where the physical and spiritual converged. This site of reenchantment saw ancient practices like ritual and magical thinking intersect with the technological advancements of the modern world. Erik Davis, writing in *Wired* in 1995, captured this intersection between the mystical and the digital, describing technopagans as “a small but vital subculture of digital savants who keep one foot in the emerging technosphere and one foot in the wild and woolly world of Paganism”. For technopagans, the internet



did not signal the death of the mystical, as some may have thought with the rise of rational, scientific worldviews. Instead, it became a new frontier for spiritual exploration, much like how earlier magical traditions accessed the unseen through ritual and symbols. The key here is the blending of two worlds—where digital technologies serve as a medium for reenacting spiritual practices that may seem ancient, yet are fully realized in the present moment. This is hauntology at its core: the collision of temporalities, where the past resurfaces in new, fragmented forms, creating an eerie fusion of old and new.

In pop culture, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* offers a clear representation of the technopagan ideal. The character Jenny Calendar, introduced as a technopagan in the episode "I Robot, You Jane" (1997), uses modern technology to engage with the mystical. As she puts it, "You think the realm of the mystical is limited to ancient texts and relics? That bad old science made the magic go away? The divine exists in cyberspace same as out here". Jenny's character highlights that technopaganism is not about returning to a purer, pre-modern spirituality but about embracing the fluidity of postmodern reenchantment thriving within new technological landscapes. This intertwining of the digital and the mystical illustrates that the hauntological imagination of the 1990s was not simply about longing for a lost past but also about the active reenchantment of the present through new, hybrid forms. This blending of worlds—the spiritual with the technological—mirrors a wider fascination with the unseen forces shaping both personal and collective experiences. Central to this is the idea of extrasensory perception, which emerged as a potent narrative device most notably in films like *The Sixth Sense* (1999).

The Sixth Sense epitomizes the 1990s' obsession with ghosts and unresolved traumas, offering a deeply hauntological exploration of memory, loss, and the supernatural. The film, centered around a young boy with extrasensory perception (ESP)—a claimed paranormal ability to receive information not through the conventional physical senses, but rather through the mind. This sixth sense, or cryptaesthesia, allows him to bridge the gap between the living and the dead, making the invisible past painfully visible in his life. *The Sixth Sense* exemplified the preoccupation with the invisible and unresolved, both personally and societally, reflecting lingering anxieties in everyday life (Weinstock 2010), from the unresolved traumas of society and an undercurrent of anxieties left behind by the end of the Cold War, to the rapid digital transformation and the uncertainties looming over the new millennium. In this context, ESP becomes a narrative device that explores the permeability between past and present—a haunting that mirrors the broader cultural sentiments of the 1990s, where past traumas were not simply erased but lingered as specters influencing the present.

The permeability between past and present, visible and invisible, points to a broader theme of disjointed time and space that runs through much of 1990s media.

This same liminality—the unsettling space between familiarity and strangeness—connects to the era's fascination with what Fisher termed the "eerie" and the "weird" (2016). Fisher's concepts of the eerie and weird explore how the unknown disrupts the ordinary. The weird, he argues, confronts us with an alien intrusion—something



radically other that disrupts our sense of reality. In contrast, the eerie addresses absence, evoking the unsettling feeling that something should be there but is not, or that something is present yet inexplicably out of place.

It thus seems particularly telling—perhaps closing the circle of this exploration that began with *Twin Peaks* and its “Meanwhile”—that a short-lived but critically acclaimed show that aired between 1991 and 1992 was titled *Eerie, Indiana*—and it is probably equally telling that this series was primarily, if not exclusively, crafted for a younger audience. Defined as a “sort of *X-Files* for children” (Thoss, 2011: 160) and “Stephen King by way of *The Simpsons*” (Roush, 1991), *Eerie, Indiana* resembles another show from the time, *Picket Fences*, by depicting the normal life of a family in a small, suburban, all-American town where bizarre occurrences happen, embodying the unsettling sense of something being both familiar and disturbingly off.

The show centers on a boy named Marshall Teller, who moves to the seemingly ordinary town of Eerie, Indiana, only to discover that it is, as he describes it, “the center of weirdness for the entire universe”. In this town, everyday objects and places—often tied to modern life’s sense of predictability—suddenly become enchanted by forces beyond reason, with strange and inexplicable phenomena abounding. Residents freeze themselves to remain eternally young, household appliances develop minds of their own, a dentist uses braces to control children’s minds, and a sentient tornado acts with intention.

Eerie, Indiana encapsulates the anxieties and eerie undercurrent of a decade grappling with the contradictions of technological progress and suburban expansion, coupled with feelings of disconnection, suspicion, and a pervasive sense of something being “out of place” in even the most familiar settings.

The 1990s American Dream seemed to conceal a deeper disillusionment, a theme reflected not only in cultural artifacts that questioned reality and societal expectations but also in products aimed at teenagers. These works represented a shifting social imaginary, increasingly depicting younger generations as struggling and feeling out of place themselves.

6. You’re still here? It’s over. Go home!

Between 1989 and 1990, readers of *Cultural Anthropology*, the journal of the Society for Cultural Anthropology, encountered a sharp exchange between two academics regarding a teenager named Ferris Bueller. Michael Moffatt and Elizabeth Traube debated the value of postmodernism in cultural analysis, using *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*, John Hughes’s 1986 film, as an example of how popular media reflects and reinforces cultural norms and resistance. Moffatt critiqued postmodernism for overcomplicating cultural interpretations, arguing that it neglected how real audiences engage with popular films. In contrast, Traube defended postmodernism’s usefulness in unpacking the ideological underpinnings of mainstream pop culture. Moffatt viewed Ferris’s irreverent attitude as a playful subversion of authority, while Traube saw it as emblematic of individualism within consumer culture.



Thus, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* serves as a cultural text that both scholars analyze to highlight the tensions between resistance and co-optation in postmodern media.

As a cultural artifact of the 1980s, it embodies the carefree optimism and individualistic spirit of the Reagan era, deeply ingrained in society—even among teenagers. Yet, by the early 1990s, Ferris Bueller's carefree optimism seemed already a relic of the past, especially for younger generations. Exploring teen cultures provides a perspective on the shifting narratives and imaginaries of broader society, offering an interesting conclusion to our journey and argumentation in this article.

Teen culture plays a significant role in shaping and reflecting broader social imaginaries. As noted by Marzo e Mori, collective worldviews project powerful images that bind various forms of collective life to a shared social reality (2019: 22).

These worldviews create frameworks that shape individuals' perceptions of themselves and their place in the world through the process of socialization—frameworks that are pre-constituted by the social world from birth. In this process, individuals internalize these social constructs, forming a “sphere of meaning” that surrounds their minds, which is socially and historically determined rather than innate.

Teen culture thus serves as a thermometer for broader social imaginaries. Its heightened focus on self-expression, rebellion, and identity formation makes it a key site where these imaginaries are both reproduced and challenged. Adolescence, a crucial phase of socialization, is when individuals engage with, resist, or internalize the narratives, symbols, and stereotypes projected by the dominant social imaginary.

Teenagers inhabit a world structured by the society into which they are born, filled with mental and physical “prostheses” such as media representations, fashion trends, and consumer technologies that help define their identities (Marzo and Mori, 2019: 22). Through the media they consume and the social interactions they participate in, teens both shape and contribute to the collective worldviews of their time. This dynamic is historically contingent, reflecting both the cultural heritage they inherit and the new forms of expression that emerge in response to social changes.

The 1990s witnessed an explosion of teen culture and pop cultural products, marking a shift from the 1980s' celebration of individualism and youthful freedom to narratives steeped in anxiety, identity crises, and societal discontent. This era reflects a more complex and often darker exploration of youth identity and social issues. Shows like *My So-Called Life* and films such as *The Craft* introduced nuanced portrayals of teenage experiences, grappling with themes of alienation and the impact of societal pressures. Unlike the carefree rebellion embodied by Ferris Bueller, 1990s characters face genuine emotional struggles, highlighting a profound sense of disconnection and a search for meaning in a rapidly changing world.

While Ferris's antics celebrate individualism in a light-hearted context, later representations underscore the complexities of adolescence, where superficiality often clashes with a yearning for deeper relationships and self-discovery.

This shift also manifested in an increasing interest among teenagers in the supernatural. Shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* reflected this cultural change, offering darker, more nuanced explorations of identity,



belief, and the unknown. As noted by Lynn Schofield Clark in 2003, teenagers engaged with supernatural media narratives not merely for entertainment but as a means of grappling with existential questions and navigating the complexities of contemporary life. This engagement with the supernatural provided teens a symbolic space to explore issues of morality, spirituality, and identity in an often fragmented social reality. Clark argues that these supernatural themes resonated with teens because they facilitated a renegotiation of boundaries between the real and the imagined, the sacred and the profane. These media texts became part of the ongoing process of socialization, where teens confronted not only the social realities they inhabited but also their developing sense of self, agency, and morality. Thus, teen culture's engagement with supernatural media was deeply entwined with broader social imaginaries. The supernatural acted as a symbolic tool for navigating the complexities of identity, faith, and morality in a world where the boundaries of social reality were constantly shifting.

The American Nineties were a decade haunted by disjunctments, both temporal and cultural. The "two deaths" casting their shadow over the era permeated its cultural imagination. These deaths were not simply political markers but also moments that fractured historical time. In this fractured temporality, cultural products and phenomena became a space for exploring hauntological anxieties. As noted by Weinstock's *Spectral America* in early 2000s, the specter became a metaphor for unresolved social and cultural tensions, serving as a key trope in narratives that questioned the very nature of reality and belief. The supernatural, in turn, reflected a larger cultural struggle with the instability of identity, faith, and morality in a world where past certainties were collapsing, and the future felt elusive.

These narratives not only encapsulated a yearning for meaning but also engaged in a deeper existential negotiation with the liminal spaces of life during a broader societal transition from old paradigms to new cultural realities. In this sense, the 1990s epitomized a time "out of joint", where ghosts—of history, trauma, and unfulfilled futures—were inescapably present.



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