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Summary

The 21st century continues to witness unprecedented developments in technology, while concerns are voiced globally over the stagnation of culture and the recycling of old ideas into new formats without adding substance. Mark Fisher perceives the disappearance of cultural innovation and expression, and its related musical nostalgia, as a result of capitalist realism, where alternatives to capitalism become less and less potent, resulting in a feeling of finality. Marc Augé's related theory sees a similar degradation in spaces, which are increasingly less owned or controlled by their inhabitants, and more by global market interests. British rock band Nothing But Thieves' album *Dead Club City* (2023) projects the present cultural situation under capitalism into a fictional club the size of a city to highlight that as the city was moved into, it can also be left behind, thereby engendering hope for alternative futures, especially through human connections formed through the senses of hearing and feeling.

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INTRODUCTION

By the time the band starts playing, a thousand things have happened. The musicians and venue staff have gone through soundcheck. Merch stands have been propped up. Audience members have draped themselves in culturally appropriate attires of black t-shirts, skinny jeans, and leather jackets; some have queued for hours outside the venue, which opened its doors to them a few hours earlier. The supporting acts will have played their sets. Anticipation has simmered in the attendees, and it's released in waves. First, the house lights turn off, plunging the audience into darkness. Then the players, the idols, the rock stars, appear from the wings. The third release, most intense, the *real* starting point of the rock show, comes through the speakers. Whether it is delivered via the forceful kick drum, shaking up the ribcages of the first few rows, or the inviting melody of a song's introduction on a keyboard or guitar, that first sounding of music marks recognition: you know this song, you know who we are, and you know what happens next. *Now* it's a concert. *Now* it's a rock show.

The vitality of rock is brought into question time and time again. In comparison to its most popular adjacent genres, pop and metal, rock seems the least interested in innovation, and indeed rock discourse is proliferated by nostalgia for 'the good old days'. At the same time, bands perceived as too closely imitating 'the classics' are also brought under fire. The American rock quartet Greta Van Fleet, for example, has struggled to shrug off more or less favorable comparisons to Led Zeppelin, all the way from the release of their debut EP *From The Fires* in 2017 to their most recent LP *Starcatcher* in 2023 (Hyden, Browne). The position of the modern rock artist is hence compromised. The British rock quintet Nothing But Thieves is not immune to this double-edged compliment. The Finnish reporter Juuso Määttänen praises the atmosphere of their August 2023 concert in Helsinki as "akin to a good old-fashioned rock gig" (Määttänen, Helsingin Sanomat, my translation). In the same review, the band's discography is described as "not the most original in the world, but in their own genre downright delightful – especially in a time when traditional guitar rock is missing from the playlists of radio stations" (my translation). Määttänen's nostalgic awe is hard to doubt: the concert in question followed the June 2023 release of *Dead Club City*, the band's fourth album. The album leans confidently into nostalgia in both its sonic and visual elements in a way characteristic of many 21st century cultural texts. It also gently revives the concept album, which some music critics already happily buried around the end of the noughties. The

concept in question is the nominal Dead Club City, a fictional place in which the album's narrator(s) reside and the story's events occur. The visual elements (including cover art, music videos, and supplementary visuals in merch and advertising) as well as the music itself are markedly retro. Something about it is familiar, even eerily so.

One reasoning for overwhelming rock nostalgia is the association of musical and subcultural belonging with adolescence and romanticized memories of one's youth, teenage rebellion, and freedom (Osgerby). As the self-proclaimedly still young author, I already look back on the musical memories of my life with fondness. For a somewhat well-behaved middle class girl growing up in the relatively quiet country of Finland, there was great liberation to be felt in losing oneself in a crowd and screaming, for once with no fear of judgement. Concert tickets were, in those years, a way to solidify at least one point of a future that seemed otherwise uncertain. Rock's association with youth delinquency can work to relieve anxiety spurred on by later life's challenges, like hyperconformity and the loss of freedom through added responsibiities.

Of course, it is not strictly rock music that has been made to walk the tightrope over nostalgia on one side and novelty on the other in the recent decades. In fact, the unmutable echoes of past sonic innovations have been a key artifact for cultural researchers. Diverse understandings of time itself – linear, cyclical, cumulative, whether we move through it or vice versa – inform our existence as time-bound subjects, no matter how much virtue we associate with timelessness. Controlling time, or rather shaping cultural time, ought to be a power of the people immersed in it, and it is inevitably connected to control over places. *Dead Club City* by Nothing But Thieves stretches across the past, present, and future, expressing contemporary anxieties which listeners can relate to while also directing their attention to connecting with others especially through sound and feeling. The conceptual city of the album encourages ways of thinking about spaces and the ways they are created by individuals and as masses: this is highlighted in the concert medium, especially in genres like rock, which emphasize live improvisation and embrace the rough edges of imperfection. These have, however, become devalued in the age of mechanical reproduction, where "audiences expect the live sound to be as close to the recorded version as possible" (O'Grady 117). The media landscape of the 21st century is hypervisual: while few works or artists can refuse this facet of their era, Nothing But Thieves certainly de-emphasizes it within the DCC concept city. It is sound and touch which work to embody the people and strengthen their *belonging in* the times and places they occupy, and *connection to* each other. Within the

album's story, characters' hopes and desires drive them forward. Those hopes and desires are not formed in vacuums, but rather they are influenced by the environment as well as the other agents within the story. The ultimate desire, which results in the most well-being and banishes the most suffering, is one for connection to the other. Connection becomes more important within the narrative than material well-being and understanding (the more intellectual version of recognition), and its erosion is the main cause of suffering for the inhabitants of the Dead Club City.

The timelessness of contemporary music runs deeper than a simple nostalgia for the aforementioned good old days. Author Mark Fisher analyzes nostalgia in his book *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* in order to then point out its inability to fully capture the sorry cultural state of the 21st century. The term "hauntology" was coined by Jacques Derrida as a combination of the words "haunt" and "ontology", or, the study of that which exists. Anything that can be said to exist has to have borders, otherwise it would simply be 'everything', therefore, anything can be defined by that which it is not. Hauntologically, however, that absence has a power in itself. Fisher describes hauntology as "the agency of the virtual, . . . the spectre . . . which acts without (physically) existing" (*Ghosts of My Life* 18). This kind of power in absence applies to time as well, in both directions. First, things in the past continue to haunt us in the present, and second, expectations of the future affect our preparation for those events, which do not exist as of yet. The central spectre for Derrida is communism, for Fisher, the central spectre is the future. "Hauntological music" is the work of artists who use or imitate outdated recording technology and mourn the loss of the kinds of futures that were imagined when that technology was the standard: "What's at stake in 21st century hauntology is not the disappearance of a particular object. What has vanished is a tendency, a virtual trajectory" (*Ghosts of My Life* 19). The nostalgia for the past is not strictly technological: that technology, rather, is representative of some lost potential, a spark that, instead of being stoked into a fire, has been snuffed out.

Analysis in strict terms of nostalgia ends up, according to Fisher, overestimating both the present and the past: "It is the tendency to falsely overestimate the past that makes nostalgia egregious . . . conversely, we are induced by ubiquitous PR into falsely overestimating the present" (*Ghosts of My Life* 20-21). In essence, reduction of time analysis to nostalgia relies on a harsh distinction between things being like they were before, or things being like they are right now: whichever one is better is one we should lean into moving

forward. The overestimation of both leads to tension between the two while simultaneously distracting from any other options. Any sense of a future, let alone one better than the present or anything that came before the present, is disregarded. This polarization is part of what Fisher's hauntology criticises: "But we shouldn't have to choose between, say, the internet and social security. One way of thinking about hauntology is that its lost futures do not force such false choices" (26). This false dichotomy drives inaction and stifles imagination by insisting that *if* things *could* be any better, they *would* be: or, that better world already existed in the past, and it has to be reincarnated for change to happen.

The erasure of the future is part of capitalist realism, a phenomenon described by Fisher as a mode where, essentially, any alternative to capitalism is profoundly unrealistic, since "its 'system of equivalence' . . . can assign all cultural objects, whether they are religious iconography, pornography, or *Das Kapital*, a monetary value" (*Capitalist Realism* 4). Fisher sees technological advancement in a late capitalist world as having stifled cultural advancement: as technology improves, it leaves behind something that up until that point had been central to culture. This culture is "destranged" as it is subject to unforgiving extortion and optimization under capitalism: "it is the culture constellated around music (fashion, discourse, cover art) that has been as important as the music itself in conjuring seductively unfamiliar worlds" (*Ghosts of My Life* 21). Music efficiently penetrates the everyday moments of 21st century living, and yet it has spread sans evolution: it reproduces immaculately, copying itself over and over. The evolutionary principle "survival of the fittest" hardly captures the cultural landscape: contemporary artistic works that fail to appeal sufficiently to popular nostalgia become undervalued, supposedly because audiences are simply disinterested with their own present. To "survive" in the present, culture has to refer to the past, in a way Fisher does not recognize in 20th century music. The technological environment has shifted culture towards homogeny and innovative extinction.

In the hands of technology and its capitalist applications, it is not only time that is dissolved, but space as well. One aspect of this is modern media's ability to move visual and auditory messages across the globe near instantly. Another is the proliferation of "non-places" as described by the French anthropologist Marc Augé. Augé sees non-places as a manifestation of "supermodernity", a term which he proposes to highlight contemporary excesses in relation to modernity, rather than using "postmodernity", which seems to imply modernity has ended or been left behind. Examples of non-places discussed in Augé's *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* include airports, shopping malls,

and highways. Physical appearance is one part of their nature: they are intentional imitations of each other, lacking any real identifiers to distinguish them from each other. That is to say, two airports on opposite sides of the globe can bear a striking resemblance, even to the point of being near indistinguishable, despite differing cultural, geographic, and historical contexts. Augé presents a strong connection between non-places and travel:

> [I]t is among solitary 'travellers' of the last century – not professional travellers or scientists, but travellers on impulse or for unexpected reasons – that we are most likely to find prophetic evocations of spaces in which neither **identity**, nor **relations**, nor **history** really make any sense; spaces in which only the movement of the fleeting images enables the observer to hypothesize the existence of a past and glimpse the possibility of a future. (87, my emphasis)

The "fleeting images" whose disjointed movements capture time's passing in the traveller's space are, on one hand, the snapshots taken by a traveller moving through a landscape. On the other hand, they are also the images of the travellers themselves, marketed to them by travel advertisements and tourism leaflets. An example of this imaging more pertinent in the 21st century would be travel influencers, whose brands are often built on the seemingly innate value of simply (temporarily) living life *somewhere else*. This aestheticizing of the elsewhere and degrading of historicity leads to "towns . . . turning into museums" while improving technology in transport and, more recently, social media, makes it "unnecessary for us to linger in them" (73). Separating the observer, the traveller, from their environment in this way "puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself [*sic*]" (79). This disconnect then extends to make non-places socially dividing and potentially hostile. The rules of a non-place are presented asocially, by incorporeal entities and the force of officers who, even if human, belong to the space more than to themselves, repeating when necessary that they are 'just following orders': "This establishes the traffic conditions of spaces in which individuals are supposed to interact only with texts, whose proponents are not individuals but 'moral entities' or institutions" (96). Instructions for spaces' use are either infused within their physical design (e.g. via hostile architecture or otherwise limited accessibility) or mediated with various signs, labels, maps, and guides.

Augé is indeed concerned that entire towns or cities can become non-places. The events of the album's story take place in a city, by no coincidence. Cityscapes are commonly utilized images in social and political theory of space[1].This follows the social contexts of rising urbanization and the development of first-world countries away from agriculture and physical production in general, and the service industry employing more and more workers. Following the increased reliance on digital infrastructure for service work, the image of the city is employed in a vast array of literature surrounding digital spaces. The limited physical space of a high-density city becomes expanded into the digital dimension.

This can lead to the physical cityscape feeling out of control for even its long-term inhabitants: buildings and other forms of infrastructure are designed, built, owned, and maintained by companies or the city councils themselves. A striking essay by Ida Auken describes an exaggarated version of this kind of city living in her essay "Welcome to 2030. I own nothing, have no privacy, and life has never been better". The essay is an ironic utopian description of life in a city without any tangible private property at all: "Everything you consider a product, has now become a service." Though Auken's world has defeated climate change and drastically cut working hours to the point the narrator hesitates to call it working, these utopian visions come with the cost of a complete lack of privacy: "I know that, somewhere, everything I do, think and dream of is recorded. I just hope that nobody will use it against me." This pitfall of Auken's paradise city is in line with Augé's non-places, access to which is justified with various measures, like tickets or identity documents: "the user of the non-place is always required to prove his innocence" (102). There is no need for individuals to trust each other directly, since trustworthyness has already been determined by outside powers at the moment of their entry (or continuously for as long as they occupy that space, as would be the case for those born into Auken's city, for example). It is completely normal to live a whole life in a city, quite comfortably one might add, without really owning any substantial part of it (or, in Auken's world, nothing at all). Another perspective on this form of economy is to say the boundary between belonging and not-belonging has been blurred: a city resident can have it all, but cannot make it their own. With the city not really *belonging to* the resident, the resident simultaneously does not *belong in* the city, and residents become

1 See, for example, Christiane Wagner's *Visualizations of Urban Space* for analysis on visual expression's importance in urban and digital environments as public spaces; *Data Justice and the Right to the City* by Jessica Brand et al. for a defense of internet users' data ownership through an urban interpretation; and Jessa Lingel's *Gentrification of the Internet* for practices of exclusion and representation in digital environments.

tourists in their own hometowns. Cities' encouraging disconnect between onesself and one's belonging(s) gives those cities an inherently liminal air.

Fisher has made the connection between hauntology and non-places in his article "What is Hauntology?", where he desribes non-places as "resembl[ing] one another more than they resemble the particular spaces in which they are located" (19). He analyzes a variety of cinematic representations of . . . concluding that "there is no need to 'fuck off home,' a perfect summary of the way in which the non-places of consumerism will also eliminate time." (22, 24) Non-places insist on the uselessness of a home, as everything a home provides for the consumer can be instead provided by other paid services. Restaurants provide food, hotels fulfill needs for rest and hygiene, gyms provide exercise, and various shops and bars provide connection and culture. In Auken's essay, this disappearance of the domestic setting manifests in, for example, the narrator's living quarters being used for business in their absence. The question remains whether this makes those living quarters a *home* at all, since the narrator's belonging in/to that home is the same as anyone elses in the city. Home is no longer a place you leave from and return to after work and leisure, but rather these things (and everything else) simply take place 'at home', in a household of hunderds of thousands of people.

In the context of the album, the establishment of a city which houses the evil system taps into present-day concerns of hospitable environments, exclusivity, and accessibility. The nostalgic, eerie familiarity of the album shows its listener where they are in time and space. By tying in concepts of physical space, DCC works to engender feelings of hope in "moving on from capitalism". DCC works to illustrate to its audience that the future is not owned by capitalism. As I aim to show, *Dead Club City* is an example of a non-place at the city level. It has erased time, it has stripped away control from its inhabitants, and thereby ingested them into itself. As a cultural text, *Dead Club City* can tie together theories about late capitalist time and space, and bridge the gap between cultural imagination and reality. As a British group, the members of Nothing But Thieves likely have similar lived experiences to those which influenced Mark Fisher's writings. The unique kind of spatial expressions found in parts of *Dead Club City* are influenced by the band's cultural expression as a rock band, re-establishing the 'space of a concert' in a variety of otherwise differing venues. Rock music cultures' appreciation for live performance and improvisation calls attention to the imperfection of the human in comparison to the machine, while still insisting on the former's value over the latter.

Another central theory surrounding music's relationship with time, politics, and economic situations comes from the French writer Jacques Attali. In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, he outlines the immense power wielded by noise and its more recent, organized form, music. Attali outlines four distinct eras of music production and movement between them: sacrifice, representation, repetition, and composition. The first three of these stages Attali sees as "strategic uses of music by power":

> In one of these zones, it seems that music is used and produced in the ritual in an attempt to make people *forget* the general violence; in another, it is employed to make people *believe* in the harmony of the world, that there is order in exchange and legitimacy in commercial power; and finally, there is one in which it serves to *silence*, by mass-producing a deafening, syncretic kind of music, and censoring all other human noises. (19)

Attali, writing in the 1980's, also predicted a fourth era, composition, as bringing freedom, though it had not yet arrived. This upcoming era of composition and freedom, which lies beyond the silent repetition era launched by recording technologies, highlights the human body's capability for "autonomous pleasure" (32). However, this utopian era arises from *noise*, the meaningless, disorderly kind, after that noise has attacked, transformed, and *destroyed* the previous network of repetition (33). Music is, after all, prophetic: "[Music] is a herald, for change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society" (5). Stephen Kennedy expands on Attali's theory in the 21st century with a critical vision not necessarily of music's heralding power, but rather the utility of that heralding: "In a world where noise, sound and music are so diverse, potential heralds multiply to such an extent as to render them virtually meaningless" (122). However, this meaninglessness is precisely what is enshrined in the composition era, where "the very absence of meaning in pure noise or in the meaningless repetition of a message, by unchanneling auditory sensations, frees the listener's imaginatinon" (Attali 33). The fourth era of music is therefore less about accurate prediction or belief in a specific kind of future, but rather about embracing uncertainty and auditory, bodily intelligence and instinct, over fear or a belief in some kind of ultimate order and harmony. Noise and music therefore have potential when it comes to creating alternative

futures that are markedly different from both the states of the present and the past. Things can be different from what they were before, and they can be different from what they are now.

The very existence of a different kind of future is therefore affirmed through its very uncertainty, and that uncertainty is found in, for example, noise. However, in addition to noise, music's future-generating power can also be highligted by approaching it transmediality. Music in the 21st century is inevitably at the very least a *multi*medial endeavour, as the social media marketplace on which music is commonly distributed is hypervisual. *Trans*mediality, however, suggests stronger connections between the different dimensions of a text. *Dead Club City* is a collection of ten songs on an album, but it is also music videos, cover art, and live performances. Moreover, this variety of media is in line with Henry Jenkins' theories on transmedia storytelling: the full story of the Dead Club City is spread across songs, images, and videos, and even the live performances associated with the album's release, which all play an integral part in the text as a whole in its cultural and historical context. The transmediality of the album enhances its message about the connections between time and space, and reality and imagination. Transmediality adds to the immersiveness of a text, in part as it diversifies the text's potential modes of distribution, but also as the transmedia text "provides a set of roles and goals which readers can assume as they enact aspects of the story through their everyday life" (Jenkins). For the listener of *Dead Club City*, these roles and goals are understood as the listener engaging with the story while also reflecting on how their real-world situation is (dis-)similar to the album's. Further, within the music culture, the album invites listeners to attend concerts and participate in the text in a more direct, embodied way. Another key element of a transmedia text is its potential in leaving "gaps or excesses in the unfolding of the story" (Jenkins), which in turn inspires the imaginations of the text's reader. Transmediality therefore is *not* an attempt at painting a fuller picture than works restricted to single channels, as it rather has the opposite effect, similarly to how noise's potential in creating new meanings comes specifically from its refusal to transmit them directly to the listener.

Though Jenkins writes on transmedia storytelling in the contexts of fiction and fictional words as well as their related industries, it can also be applied into real-world histories, as Ilkka Lähteenmäki does:

> A transmedia perspective emphasizes the idea that no medium is safe on its own little island in the modern media ocean. At

> the same time, a transmedia perspective does not give any preference to history over other presentations simply for the sake of its status as an academic discipline. This serves to reveal intuitions about history as a practice and a form of knowledge. (301-302)

A transmedia approach emphasizes that sonic networks, including noise, are only one aspect of music, and that considering the elements surrounding its acoustic realm will form a more cohesive picture of its effects as a text. The scattering of text across mediums does not increase its intenral cohesion: the ultimate goal, then, of reading *Dead Club City* and similar texts transmedially is not exactly to make more sense of their internal cohesion or to form a more well-rounded image of the city, but rather to generate more surface area, more points of entry, between the internal world of the album and the real world which the album exists within. Understanding real-world history as fractal and incomplete informs understandings of the present and the future, again suggesting that limiting knowledge to singular paths of information (manifesting as, for example, the over-emphasis on literary texts in history, or the pervasiveness of capitalist realism) *is* insufficient and leaves gaps in that knowledge.

Overreliance on visuality is a widespread critique of 21st century cultures, which rely too much on appearances rather than substance. Augé sees this visual emphasis in travel, and the way it "constructs a fictional relationship between gaze and landscape" (86), as if seeing the scene from a safe distance was the same as immersion within it. He emphasizes this distance with an image of the traveller standing on a ship's deck as it departs, looking out to the place they were before as they are pulled away, "straining to see it: soon it is only a shadow, a rumour, a noise. This abolition if place is also the consummation of the journey, the traveller's last pose" (89). Visuality in the form of the gaze, observing the spectacle of elsewhere, proposes reality while keeping the gazer at a distance from it. Mark Fisher brings these visual illusions of proximity into the digital age in "What is Hauntology?" with the arrival of tele-technologies: "Events that are spatially distant become available to audience instantaneously" (19). Events are witnessed more than they are experienced, but their constant presence on screens creates an illusion that the two are one and the same. Visual media consumers *feel* more and more connected to events that are far away from them, but this connection's foundation in visuality keeps them at a distance.

Rather than relying on visuality for interpersonal recognition, Adriana Cavarero speaks on the human voice as a unique marker of personhood and individuality while retaining the necessity of the other: a voice has to be received by an ear. The power of the voice is not only in its ability to transmit powerful *language*, but in the sheer ringing of its sound:

> The typical freedom with which human beings combine words is never a sufficient index of the uniqueness of the one who speaks. The voice, however, is always different from all the other voices, even if the words are the same, as often happens in the case of a song. (Cavarero, 3)

It is no coincidence, then, that *Dead Club City* references both sight and hearing as markers of division and connection within the album's storyline, simultaneously working to critique of the real-world conditions under which the album was produced. The importance of hearing and singing (or, rather, focusing on "the purely vocal, and not on the semantic" (Cavarero 5)) gives a musical artist's influence a real, corporeal receptor in its audience. The two form a positive feedback effect, which contributes to the enchanting atmosphere at concerts, including those of Nothing But Thieves. Time and time again, the distancing effect of sight, as affirmed by Augé and the images of the traveller, is resisted by the intimating power of music and the human voice.

A final defense of music's power has to be made in its cultural position as popular. The reduction of popular music to a strictly industrial product is a tempting expansion of the aforementioned perceptions of capital's force in erasing feelings of temporality: however, the unique properties of popular music also give them unique value, as argued for by Allison Stone in *The Value of Popular Music.* Stone outlines the truth-presenting value of popular music in four facets: repetitive structure, explicit rhythm, coalescence of meanings, and the primacy of semiotic meaning (xix-xxi). The term semiotic meaning here comes from Julia Kristeva's work on the symbolic and semiotic realms, which describe the two ways human beings extract meaning from the world, or, "two modalities of what is, for us, the same signifying process" (Kristeva 23-24, my emphasis). In essence, semiotic meanings are those generated by people pre-linguistically, in their infancy, "previous and necessary to the acquisition of language, but not identical to language" (29), while symbolic meanings are

generated socially and linguistically after a degree of semiotic meaning-making has occurred. Stone highlights, in accordance with Kristeva's work, that "[the] semiotic realm persists throughout our lives" (xxi), and that the semiotic realm insists that the effects of popular music on the body are evidence of "the intelligence of the body" (xxiv). This is in stark contrast to the view that music's ability to inspire movement in the body is an assertion of its violent, intrusive power on human intelligence.

Academic writing on rock music has not yet tackled Nothing But Thieves, nor many of their contemporary rock colleagues. This thesis seeks to amend this oversight by close reading *Dead Club City* and analyzing it in the light of theories about time, space, and music. This analysis will hopefully shed light on present-day cultural awareness and vitality of the era's music and even resist the notion that "rock'n'roll is dead." Further, the album serves as a point of both connection and difference between the presented theories to further examine their efficacy in analyzing culture today and in the future.

The acoustic realm, as it deals with noise, the voice, and sonic nostalgia, is one undeniable aspect of the album. At the same time, these are complemented by the albums lyrics, which highlight the political message of the album. Outside of the realms of sound and singing, the albums visual elements, especially music videos, add another road to approach the world of the DCC. Further, the album is associated with a series of live concerts on the Dead Club City Tour, where time, space, and the listener come together around the art of music. All of these elements—sound, lyrics, visuality, and live performance—come together to form the most cohesive image of *Dead Club City* as a text and maximize its potential for change. The album engenders hope for the future through connection.

This introduction has established the groundwork for the following sections. Starting with physical space, chapter 1 describes Dead Club City as a place, or rather a non-place. The city establishes within itself various spatial boundaries while erasing its outer threshold in an expansion which is reflected in the minds of its citizens. This expansion mimics the hijacking of human desires by capitalist market sensibilities. Chapter 2 expands on the parallel occupation of time through artificial scarcity. Chasing convenience becomes a necessary condition of survival. Human connection, however, is near-impossible to optimize with technology: the promise of convenience for connection remains unmet by digital technologies which work more to isolate than connect. *Dead Club City* expresses this disconnect by contrasting visual immediacy with acoustic intimacy. Finally, chapter 3 focuses on the optimism and hope found in *Dead Club City,* asserting the value of trusting other people and

the importance uncertainty as it is conductive to imagination. The album asserts the ongoing importance of music, including live performance, in creating connections that encourage proximity and community instead of mere spectacle and passive, visual observation. A brief conclusion considers further implications concerning trends in music's cultural position, the development of non-places in a musical context, and the bidirectional road of belonging.

CHAPTER 1: PLACE – Driven by Desire: Visions, Haunting, and Destination

A typical concert of the Dead Club City tour starts, as does the album, with an announcement. “Welcome to the DCC, Dead Club City” (0:07-0:12). Conor Mason’s voice, itself high-pitched and unsettling, names the album and establishes that the listener has arrived some*where*. The album’s titular city is, to understate the matter, an unusual one, a “dead” one, and an example of a non-place spanning across an entire city. The DCC's similarity to non-places as well as its resonance with listeners’ observations about present society functions as a warning sign, which, contrasted with the narrative’s resistance against the city, invites listeners to apply a critical lens when reflecting on their own surroundings and the places they call home.

The structure of the song’s lyrics suggests a kind of advertisement for the Dead Club City. This advertisement appeals to the character speaking in the first verse, who find themselves in an unfavorable situation and look for a solution, a movement away from their current place and towards something new. The concept of liminality refers to movement between two things, to the crossing of a border or threshold of some kind. Liminality is found in psychoanalysis and anthropology, as well as in literary analysis. Liminality lies between one space and another, between the real and the imaginary, between existence and non-existence, between the mind and the body, without ever being fully on one side or the other. Though the origins of the word imply more concrete structures like entryways and gates, the word has come to be used to refer to “indeterminacy or in-betweenness rather than the clear-cut notion of separation or demarcation. The liminal is basically unascribable, undescribable, neither here nor there” (Gadoin and Ramiel 5). Liminality concerns physical spaces as well as internal, mental states. "Welcome to the DCC” establishes the city’s liminality especially through lyrics and vocal performance.

The ironic advertisement of “All the heaven, all the time” appears in the chorus, notably, as this means it is repeated multiple times throughout the song, where the verses in between are delivered by a less optimistic narrator. The tagline is an obvious hyperbole. As such, it reflects real-world scepticism when it comes to advertisement itself: this development has been noted by web developers, and the efficacy of advertisements is now moving towards the private sphere, i.e. the value of an advertisement is not in visibility in a user’s feed but shareability between users themselves (McCoy). Advertisers’ goal is no longer to only be visible and catch attention, but to be shared in group chats and linked to others. Capitalism, as

well as the DCC, hijack human processes of connection to drive the goals of capital itself. The promise of tele-technologies (phones, televisions) is that they bring people closer together. This promise is not kept, however, and instead tele-technologies begin to engender distance and isolation.

The voice of vocalist Conor Mason switches between being the voice of the DCC's ghost-like utopia as well as the outsider looking for solutions in it. The difference between the to is especially prominent between the initial chorus and the first verse, the former of which is sung in Mason's spectrally high register. The end of the first chorus and the following verse are separated by a cut-off line and the full band joining in the playing: "Live your perfect life / Welcome to the – / We got problems" (0:35-0:57). As Mason's voice falls into a more conversational pitch in the verse and describes the poor conditions of the reality outside of the DCC, the choruses' advertisements become all the more enchanting by contrast. The first verse begins with "We got problems / See them gather on the shore" (0:55-0:59). Consumerism is criticized for its overproduction of goods and causing discarded items to gather in floating "islands" of trash on the ocean or in piles on beaches. Instead of being dealt with responsibly, issues are tossed into the sea and never tackled head-on, thereby taking the easy way out of trouble.

The narrator's awareness of current issues drives them to buy into the dream of the DCC. This welcoming, surface-level charm is eerily similar to the travel advertisements Augé pointed to as markers of non-placement. A central theory of capitalist realism is the freedom of choice behind it: the memory of this desire is what "Welcome to the DCC" represents. It reminds the listener that, like many other dystopias, it was not necessarily imposed top-down, but expertly marketed, always keeping the citizens' desires in mind.

While "Can't say nothing anymore" (1:01-1:03) refers to a common conservative talking point, used to accuse more politically progressive parties of infringing on freedom of speech, it is followed by the narrator "shouting down a hole / 'Hello?' (1:08-1:11). This highlights the narrator's isolation, both in mind and in body. They feel, however misinformed that feeling may be, unable to express their thoughts. Further, when they do use their voice, it is only to shout down a hole, apparently to no response. The narrator is stuck in a high position of an echo chamber, where the potential for reciprocity of the human voice is tainted condecension (shouting 'down') and echoes, where one's own voice becomes indistinguishable from others. Here we can turn to Adriana Cavarero's concepts of the voice and its role in communicating connection through a baseline acoustic difference: "to speak to

one another is to communicate oneself to others in the plurality of voices. In other words, the act of speaking is relational" (13). Disconnect for the narrator in "Welcome to the DCC" comes from silence, from lack of listening. Their hope for change is still based in acoustics: "I've been hoping for your call" (1:23-1:26). A 'call' can refer to both the external voice of the DCC's enticement, but also to its effect, namely provoking in the narrator an internal ambition, a 'calling'. The DCC calls to the outsiders, not as an external force, but rather evoking a certain desire within them. Where there is no other human voice to respond to them, the narrator's ears tune in to the DCC's advertisements and their individual, inner desires.

Where the voice fails, the narrator turns to rely on visuality. The song, especially its chorus, being an advertisement is hinted at with the lyrics "Watch and repeat / Saw your heaven in between" (1:11-1:15). Social media as a platform has become a major carrier for cultural texts (mostly discussed as simply "content"), which are more seamlessly than ever blended with marketing. Advertisements' repetition and blending together with the "real" content (admittedly a somewhat dubious distinction following the legitimation of social media monetization) is a key difference between social media advertisements and advertisements in other mediums, like television shows or newspapers. In this sense, social media advertisements reflect the tourism billboards as presented by Augé. The narrator sees the DCC's utopian vision in fleeting images, as social media users see advertisements, and as drivers see billboards on highways.

All of the offerings of the DCC are presented as commodities. This includes heaven and time, as heard in the choruses, but the list is expanded in the bridge. "We've got the feelings that you want / Peace, love, and understanding" (2:29-2:37). The narrator's agreement to the sale is presented as empowering and freely made: "Take back control, be happy" (2:41-2:45). Curiously, the city's ownership of feelings, which is what allows those feelings to be marketed to the song's character, is not questioned. This transactionality is reminiscient of the ways capitalism can swoop in to bandaid most any need. Whatever the song character has to give up in return is not mentioned.

Feelings, rather than indicators of the outside world, are commodities to be achieved individually, hence their acquirement is an act of "taking back control". This idea resonates within achievement cultures, where happiness can be earned only through hard work and dedication. These virtues are seen as granting one access to an exclusive group of people who have *deserved the right* to be happy through their own, individual efforts.

After “dead”, the other defining characteristic of the city is “club”. The connotations of “clubs” are diverse. A country club is a place for the upper class to engage in class-appropriate social and physical activities; a nightclub is a place for young party animals to do the same. A club is prestigious, exclusive, and hedonistic: it promises its members temporary release from the worries and responsibilities of their life outside. In the Dead Club City, this release is without end: “Wake up in the DCC, Dead Club City / All the heaven, all the time” (0:14-0:23).This combination of exclusivity and escapism resonates with Mark Fisher’s interpretation of the eerie in contrast to the weird:

> Capital is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity. . . . The eerie also entails a disengagement from our current attachments. But, with the eerie, this disengagement does not usually have the quality of shock that is typically a feature of the weird. (The Weird and the Eerie, 11, 13)

The disengagement, which would result in an experience of shock, simply does not occur in the DCC. The club cannot be left behind without leaving the city. You wake up in the club, you go to sleep in the club, and unlike a traditional club, the “club city's” pervasiveness robs its occupants of the ability to be shocked by its perversions. This makes it eerie. The contrast between weirdness and eeriness in Fisher’s work can be employed to criticize non-places and thereby “dead cities”: weirdness recognizes a presence which does not belong, but eeriness has to do with a more fundamental, existential issue, namely This relates to the disconnect between a city’s inhabitants and the erosion of their local community. The eerie can be dissapated through knowledge, unlike the weird (Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 62). The eeriness of the Dead Club City is associated with its blurry internal boundaries.

At Crossroads: “Members Only” and “City Haunts”

The conflicting nature of a club also being a city – a hometown, a place of residence, a place of attachments and buildings roots – becomes highlighted in tracks 7, “Members Only” and 5, “City Haunts”. In both songs, the narrators find themselves in a Kafkaesque struggle with the

boundaries that have defined their life. The concepts of prestige, ambition, and striving—traditional markers of belonging in an individualistic, competitive capitalist society—create tension with the passivity of death, the other major presence in the DCC. One *strives* to become a member, because they are “not yet” one, only to die on arrival, i.e. become “no longer”. Contemporary understandings of both success and leisure have become warped from their previous definitions. In *Burnout Society*, Byung-Chul Han desribes an undead state of inhabitants in societies in which productivity is increased through compelling subjects to strive endlessly, and to associate that striving with freedom: “The *homines sacri* of achievement society also differ from those of the society of sovereignty on another score. They cannot be killed at all. Their life equals that of the undead. They are too alive to die, and too dead to live” (51). This kind of liminal life is what is on offer for the inhabitants of the DCC as well.

The narrators of “Members Only” are consistently denied access to the club: “I’ve been hearing this all my life / Sorry sir, this is members only” (0:17-0:23). As the DCC is a city-wide club which the characters are supposed to call home, this denial is an especially destabilizing and displacing force. Though "Members Only” focuses on the club and its exclusivity, the enforcers of that exclusion are still people. The narrators’ exclusion from the club is ultimately based on sight: “Saw it online / started to blind your heart” (0:28-0:33) and “Saw your face in the paper with a warning” (1:10-1:12). This pre-emptive exclusion, based on vision and reason, imitates the interpersonal distrust associated with non-places which becomes used to justify intrusive security measures and assert top-down power onto citizens. The exclusion of the narrators is not given any particular reason outside of the judgement as made by the bouncer, who downplays their personal responsibility in the exclusion: “I don’t wanna play politics” (1:02-1:05). Augé writes on inclusion into a non-place:

> Checks on the contract and the user’s identity . . . stamp the space of contemporary consumption with the sign of non-place: it can be entered only by the innocent. Here words hardly count any longer. There will be no individualization (no right to anonymity) without identity checks. (*Non-places* 102)

The narrators of “Members Only” highlight the experience of those who are unable to provide the necessary documents or identification: exclusion, loneliness, and dismissal. This

dismissal comes not only from the bouncer, the officer in power, but from “everybody”: “And everybody’s telling me / You’ve got to let it go” (0:52-0:57). Demanding nonchalance at one’s exclusion is a facet of achievement society,

In contrast to the exclusive *club*, track 5, “City Haunts”, focuses on the supposedly inclusive and homely *city*, and the irony of its illegibility for citizens. This includes the city itself remaining strange, but also the citizens remaining strange to each other, and seemingly only approaching each other for hedonistic pleasures or mutual exploitation instead of connection.

The DCC’s supposed freedom of movement, again, reminiscient of the ironic directionlessness Augé writes about, is palpable in the lyrics “Train tracks keep tracking me” (0:06-0:09). Train tracks are the means to movement, but they are still owned by a private entity and require the correct document—a ticket—to enter. Further, those tracks “tracking” the narrator highlight their anxiety and feelings of being watched, which are inherent in the functions of non-places like train stations and airports. This is emphasized by the following line, “Sleazeballs eyeballing me for too long” (0:10-0:17). The other inhabitants of the city, save for the second-person subject ‘you’, are described in unfriendly terms—sleazeballs and pricks—suggesting hostility between the city’s inhabitants.

A “Hackney prick” asks the narrator for a light, then tells them to meet in the bathroom. This is the second reference to a bathroom on the album, the first one being in track 3, “Tomorrow Is Closed”, where the narrator read prophecies of the world’s ending on the bathroom wall. The bathroom within the context of the album represents a break from the ideal of the city. “City Haunts” tells that the DCC’s club-city structure has taken over every corner of the world: “The party’s just run outer space” (0:39-0:44). The double meaning of party as either a political party or a celebratory one refers to the DCC’s hedonistic pleasure as a way of governance, reflecting real-world capitalistic commodification. In either case, the milieu of the bathroom breaks the DCC’s utopian, individualist illusion: “Sold a dream, now we're circling down the drain” (0:27-0:32). The characters, both having been let down by the DCC, have begun to spiral, and the interaction in the bathroom turns violent.

The aforementioned prick threatens the narrator: “It’s your money, guy, or it’s your life” (0:36-0:39). One of the spectral aspects of money is its increasing power as it disappears: i.e. its absence is always felt more than its presence. The power of capital relies on its incomprehensibility, which is necessary if capital is to remain the eerie entity at the center of the DCC. As Fisher wrote on eeriness, it can be dissapated through knowledge of

that entity's agency: "Behind all of the manifestations of the eerie, the central enigma at its core is the problem of agency" *(The Weird and The Eerie* 63). The narrator, however, is too lost within the city to gain this knowledge: "It'd be a lie if i said that I got this place" (0:45-0:50). As a result, they are unable to leave it.

Even within the disconnected, hedonistic, haunting city, the narrator's desire for connection stems from singing, from song. "Can you do that thing to me? / Sweet song you sing to me / 'Cause it's so rare to find a common mind / Around here" (1:52-2:09). The narrator still recognizes the importance of the voice in song when it comes to forming connection, i.e. "a common mind", again markedly separate from vision or reason.

Icons and Imitation: "Welcome To The DCC", "Foreign Language", and "Tomorrow Is Closed"

The ironic advertisement of "All the heaven, all the time" appears in the chorus, notably, as this means it is repeated multiple times throughout the song, where the verses in between are delivered by a less optimistic narrator. The tagline is an obvious hyperbole. As such, it reflects real-world scepticism when it comes to advertisement itself: this development has been noted by web developers, and the efficacy of advertisements is now moving towards the private sphere, i.e. the value of an advertisement is not in visibility in a user's feed but shareability between users themselves (McCoy). Advertisers' goal is no longer to only be visible and catch attention, but to be shared in group chats and linked to others. What capital then provides is the medium for it. In the lecture series *Postcapitalist Desire*, Mark Fisher points out capital's self-insertion as a necessity for communication being driven by the lack of time (131). The lack of time manifests as degradation of places as well: instead of going to a place, technology provides a telecommunicated image of it.

The music video of "Welcome To The DCC" starts with the camera pulling back from an eye, with a bright DCC logo reflected in it. The members of the real band Nothing But Thieves all feature in the music video in the roles of their alter egos, whose band is called "Zzzeroes", as advertised at 1:13 in the video. Mason's character leans against a column in a club setting, gazing at the camera. The band inserts themselves into the complex, evil machinery of the DCC, yet again highlighting their conflicted position as industry artists. The visuality of the DCC and the music industry are criticized in parallel: the DCC sells a vision, which will be dispelled. The band embodies this marketing of utopia in the music video.

There are two other main characters in the video. They each enter the Dead Club City at different times, and have two very different experiences upon entering. The first character, whose eye is zoomed out of at the start of the video, passes through the club relatively ease: at the two-minute mark, however, the camera pulls back to show them in a television. It seems implied that this character was merely a part of the DCC advertisement. The camera then pans to the second character who, having seen the ad, is pulled into the city in an ecstatic flurry of bright lights. They end up in a house of mirrors, reflecting only their own image back to them. This arrangement perfectly encapsulates the traveller space which Augé saw as "the archetype of *non-place*" (86). The enchantment of the advertisement is in the gaze, "offering the would-be traveller advance images of curious or contemplative faces" (86). The character kisses the mirror: they are in contact only with another image of theirself (79).

It is no coincidence that the lyric video for track 9, "Foreign Language", depicts an animated highway from the perspective of a passenger, who gazes out onto advertisements and roadsigns that display the song's lyrics. This image is central to Augé's understanding of a non-place. Strikingly, the background of the music video shows accelarated time: the sky goes from light to dark to light again, which each "day" lasting about ten seconds. This is out of rhythm which the perceived pace of the passenger and their vehicle. The lyric video of "Foreign Language" highlights the connection between non-places and their ironic erasure of proximity, as well as their time-erasing quality: though they are efficient, getting passengers from place to place faster, they also isolate and dehumanize them in relation to others taking the same route. The landscape of the motorway remains untouched by its users.

The music video of "Tomorrow is Closed" presents the vocalist Conor Mason in the role of a dystopian priest. The image is created through costuming, set design, and physical gestures. The establishment of a church within the Dead Club City, within a non-place milieu, forms an image of what spirituality looks like within a non-place. For one, in place of pews, the church has plastic chairs, side by side, and empty. The priest gives a sermon to a room of empty chairs and inhales an unknown gas flowing from a mask. This gas the priest then distributes to others, his congregation, in a dark space markedly different from the empty chairs in the brutalist parking lot sermon room. The band members' double roles throughout the music videos, as musicians and as religious leaders, within the DCC, is a critique of the way the role of the musician is valorized by the music industry as a way to create artificial scarcity of music, and thereby manage its power. Following Attali's proposal of the composition network, where the goal of music would become pleasure of the performer, the

abundance of pleasure has to be managed to keep people productive. The gas administered by Mason's character to the congregation members symbolizes the ideal product of capitalism, in that it creates a short-form artificial pleasure to pacify its consumers' most basic needs. Any genuine depth or development of the soul, as might be the customary task of a religious movement, is lacking in the Dead Club City church.

The DCC is dead by name, but advertises itself as a backdrop for "perfect lives". This contradiction between death and life makes it a liminal space: however, this liminality ends up undermining its tranquility. The DCC's self-contradictions force it into an in-betweenness: the album's characters start from outside the DCC, they move through it, and eventually come out the other end and destroy it. The final song of the album, "Pop The Balloon", blends together urban and digital environments along with all their connotations: "Find a dream to gentrify" (0:37-0:39). Gentrification, the process of urban development often at the cost of displacing those who were already living in those spaces, applied to dreams seems to imply the ways in which capitalism's demands of eternal growth also demand new dreams to be created by those living under it. The fear of capitalist subjects of becoming useless to that system are not only philosophical but physical. Especially workers within creative fields have felt existential dread with the rollout of generative AI tools: the dream of being an artist has to be reworked. The development of technologies that shortcircuit human intervention while insisting on the same time committment into capitalist production from the individual (i.e. forty hours of work a week) inevitably displaces the political, economic, and professional aspirations of working class citizens.

Getting There: Economics and the Concert Space

Music economics have put concerts into a tight spot: where streaming has made music's recorded consumption, repetition, more accessible than ever, it has seemingly done so by simultaneously increasing the share of profits generated by concerts. In short, putting on a good live show is more important than ever. This pressure has resulted in skyrocketing ticket prices, making the concert experience more precarious and unaccessible. Since the live concert is the place where the rock musician improvises and makes their mistakes, proving their personhood and de-sanctifying their skill, denying the audience that potential amplifies the negative effects of non-places. Concerts, despite their transient nature, are resistant to some non-place processes.

A concert is a place insofar as it is gone to. However, the present-day concert relies on many of the same principles as Augé's non-places: for example, they require external proof that you belong there (a ticket). They are also rather elusive: the place of a concert is emptied, or becomes occupied by something completely different, for example, a hockey game, within hours or days: "Since non-places are there to be passed through, they are measured in units of time" (*Non-places* 104). The space is not controlled by the audience. Over a tour, the concert is recreated with a goal of relatively high similarity between dates. It rather seems the less variety there is between shows, the better, from the perspective of production and efficiency. There are, of course, exceptions to this, which become focal points in later critiques of multi-date tours. Nicola Spelman writes in *The Arena Concert: Music, Media and Mass Entertainment*: "it is impossible for performances to replicate [recordings] exactly, and this is clearly not the intention of most artists, nor the desire of their fans" (Spelman 242). Spelman's focus is on audience participation during particular songs, though there are other ways the uniqueness of the audience can be brought to the spotlight.

The stand-out differences between tour dates can include minor setlist changes or a baseline recognition of the city or country by the artist, for example in speeches to the tune of "how are you feeling Amsterdam?" or spoken lines in a local language, or local, customized flags, often presented as fan projects and waved on stage by the artist. To a degree, the pattern of a show grounds it—the audience knows the band members, their songs and lyrics, and those are part of the reason they attend—but it is the breaking of those patterns in-concert that give concerts some *placing*.

Going to the venue is a necessary but not sufficient condition to have been at one of these events. A concert happens in the right place at the right time. Big tours are often criticized for monetary inaccessability as well as geographic restraint – those active in online music communities will recognize the comment "come to Brazil" underneath several artists' social media announcements (to the point where American punk group The Offspring released a song titled "Come To Brazil" in 2024) and the despair of Eastern European fans when "European" tours are limited to, say, England, Germany, and the Netherlands. Representatives of the Finnish culture industry have continuously struggled to accommodate large tours, and musical acts are forced to compete with the still more relevant sports industry for spaces. Even when a concert is within reach, infrastructures of public transport and hospitality are necessary for participation. The further away a concert is, the more time it

costs to attend. As concerts become centralized into fewer major arenas and cultural hubs, the time burden imposed on attendees grows.

This chapter has emphasized the connection between non-places and late-stage capitalism, and how the well-being of citizens is erased by denying them access to place. The Dead Club City featured on Nothing But Thieves' album is representative of these conditions, and the album's story reflects the creation of non-places under capitalism.

This access is also subject to time constraints. Some argue that surplus value is the most stolen asset in the world. Some 21st century contemporaries might suggest data. However, from yet other perspectives, it is time. Bo Burnham warned ominously: "they are coming for every second of your life." Though time theft is currently often understood as the fault of the employee slacking on the clock, another culprit can be revealed in capitalism's playbour, irresponsible proliferation of addictive substances in short-form content, the slashing of attention spans, and, most recently, new, impossible and inhuman timeframes of production even in artful endeavors as facilitated by generative artificial intelligence. The next chapter, therefore, will shift focus from place to time, and see how it flows in the Dead Club City.

CHAPTER 2: TIME – Whenever's Good For You: Time, Convenience, and Morality

Specters, the mysterious entities at the heart of hauntology, are results of warped timelines. The past, present, and future stop moving in unison. The album's opening track "Welcome to the DCC" boasts a series of pairings, especially in its repeating choruses: "All the heaven, all the time." This is the central promise made by the Dead Club City to its inhabitants. However, the wording itself poses a difficult tension between certainty and vagueness: the connection between heaven and time remains questionable. The DCC establishes itself as an arbitror of time, the one who divides it up and distributes it among citizens. This is connected to the idea of some well-off communities in first world countries being "time-poor", as Fisher writes: "Time-poverty is real. And that's what they've done! . . . They produce an artificial scarcity of time in order to produce a *real* scarcity of natural resources" (*Postcapitalist Desire* 129-130). Time itself is presented a commodity: "All the heaven, all the time / if you dream it, you can have it / if you believe it, it can happen." Instead of "all the time" modifying heaven, i.e. DCC inhabitants can have constant heaven, the two are separate entities: limitless time becomes a threat, because it has to be scarcified in order for the system to work.

The time of everyday citizens becomes captured by their environment, by the DCC and its systems. This is driven by marketing and individualism. Byung-Chul Han describes the phenomenon in *Burnout Society.* In essence, society's shift from directing citizens with external or spiritual punishment towards an insistence on bottomless ambition has degraded the citizens' ability to feel satisfied, resulting in their constant projection of the self into either the past or the future. In this sense, every *present* moment is seized.

Torn Futures: "Overcome" and "Keeping You Around"

Track 2, "Overcome," is one of the four songs released as a single before the full album release. For many of the concerts of the Dead Club City tour, it was also the final song of the encore. Its sound and message are distinctly optimistic in the context of the album, though lyrically still far from cheerful. Lyricist Joe Langridge-Brown describes the song's characters as heading for the Dead Club City: "Overcome has always felt like a 'throw your stuff in a bag and get away' song. Dead Club City (the city) would definitely feel enticing for someone like that" (Rock'n'load). While this escapist reading of the song holds up within the album's world, another reading can be made of the song in its live performance context, especially

considering its placement in the tour setlist as a closing song. The song therefore plays a double role: in-album, it is the soundtrack of the characters heading into the mouth of the beast, and in-concert it bids farewell to the audience.

The lyrics of "Overcome" focus on the complexities of moving towards, or actively creating, a future that is still unknown. The 1st perspective narrator states "I don't wanna fight / My money's in a bag in the back for you / The future's overdue / Yeah I know that" (0:05-0:15). The narrator expresses an anticipation for the future, for something that should have arrived by now, but has not, an "overdue future", similar to the slow cancellation of the future as proposed by Mark Fisher, where expected changes or developments do not occur, a process to which hauntological music is a culmination *(Ghosts of My Life* 13-17). Through the lines "Our song blaring out a dead radio / Singing 'I need to know'" (0:18-0:25) the narrator subtly criticizes the very music which they still find meaningful: the song is theirs, i.e. it has some special importance to their romantic connection or shared journey, but it plays from a "dead" radio. The narrator recognizes in themselves the ability to connect to another over the product of something lifeless, to reanimate it with their own meaning. In the album's internal context, this comes across as the characters' desire for something new, which they hope to find in the Dead Club City. This moment of connection through music, through sound, will degrade once they reach the city. However, once the characters have made their decision, it is final: "No turning back" (0:25-0:28). The only way out of the Dead Club City is through it.

Within the concert, "Overcome" transforms into a story about leaving the Dead Club City behind as the concert ends, and looking past it. It is the body that "lean(s) in, into the moment", it is the hand of the body that "reach(es) through the divide" and "feel(s) the open". Even in emptiness ('divide' and 'open' certainly refer to a marked absence), there is a body that looks for the other. At this point in the show, the audience has been made well aware of the illusions of the Dead Club City, and the overall message of the track becomes a far more optimistic one: a more in-depth reading of this alternate timeline will follow in the third chapter. Instead, returning to the album's inner world and following the characters of "Overcome", their connection becomes degraded in track 4, "Keeping You Around."

"Keeping You Around" sounds drawling and nostalgic as it tells the tale of love's decay and departure, and ultimately, disconnection between the song's characters. As the relationship falls apart, the narrator briefly wishes they could run away from it all and be forgotten. The self-deprication found in the lyrics tells of the narrator's losing faith in their

own value as a person, driven in part by their own perceived immorality and failures. These feelings are driving forces of the achievement society as described by Byung-Chul Han and the centerless capitalist society as described by Fisher. The separation of the two people in the story, them no longer seeing a future together, is a result of the DCC's compelling convenience.

One part of auto-exploitation as described by Han highlights that its power stems from an illusion of freedom. Instead of external domination, it is compulsion that drives people. "Tell me how a modern human should be / 'It's so easy' / You're so pretty when you lie to me" (0:20-0:30). The narrator has a harder time being 'a modern human' than their lover. The narrator recognizes their own difficulty. "I wish I could make it easy, oh / I'm still a broken machine, babe" (1:26-1:39). The difficulty of human connection drives the two apart: the lyrics of "Keeping You Around" warn the listener about the antisocial aspects of technologies which promise easy connection, and the achievement society's tendency to overemphasize individual responsibility over collectivity.

The Veil of Memory: "Green Eyes :: Siena"

"Green Eyes :: Siena" is sonically the album's softest track. The centralizing of the visual sense in the track stands out, as elsewhere in the album it is sound and touch through which the narrator has connected to the people around them. The song's slow rhythm, gently flowing vocals, and lyrical emphasis on waiting and patience make it stand out. Underneath the romantic message lies a passivity, hinting at the narrator falling for the DCC's hypnotic allure, personified in the track in a lover with green eyes and bearing the name of an Italian city. Green is the color of nature, growth, and creativity, but also of money, jealousy, and toxicity.

Amnesia is therefore one tool with which citizens can cope with the difficulty of their situation. Another is dreamwork. Fisher writes: "If memory disorder provides a compelling analogy for the glitches in capitalist realism, the model for its smooth functioning would be dreamwork" (60). In the song, "Siena dream" is what, instead of inspiring motion, inspires passivity and suppression. In contrast to the narrator of "Foreign Language", who focuses on the sound of the other's voice, the narrator of "Green Eyes :: Siena" remains a step removed from the other. The focus is on the eyes, which provide distance, and the narrator's desire to kiss the other's mouth, and their willingness to make sacrifices for it: "Oh, what I would give,

give for one kiss on your open mouth" (1:05-1:12). In the second verse, the narrator proclaims: "As time began unwinding I'd be yours alone" (2:05-2:10). The unwinding of time is in direct opposition to interpersonal connection and community: "yours alone", referring to an extreme possession, highlights the disconnect between those inhabiting timeless non-places, like the DCC.

Fisher writes in *Capitalist Realism* about the amnesia and dreaming associated with the titular phenomenon. In essence, forgetting things is "perhaps the only way to stay healthy amidst capitalism's perpetual instability" (54). This is in part a result of capitalism's devotion to the bureaucratic process, which, despite its appearances of objectivity and reality, ultimately still prioritizes representations of success over real development. This is apparent in, for example, educational institutions and their funding being evaluated on the basis of students' exam scores. Forgetting is a precondition of consistently setting forward only the narrative which best serves the interests of onesself or the institutions one represents. "Sometimes it's hard to remember / What we liked about this place" (0:38-0:46): the DCC has broken the promises it made in track 1, which compelled the characters to start their journey in track 2. Here, in "Green Eyes :: Siena", the narrator nevertheless no longer feels the drive to move on past their situation: "I really don't want you to think / It's the reason I stay" (0:50-0:55). The narrator's dedication to Siena might just be that amnesia, however reluctant they are to admit that fact. Jacques Attali connects forgetting with fear: "music is used and produced in the ritual in an attempt to make people forget the general violence . . . forget the fear of violence" (19). Where losing a loved one might feel violent, so might the loss of capital.

There is an asymmetry between Siena and the narrator. The narrator clearly considers theirself similar to Siena: "What were we to do? / Just two imperfect pieces pulling at the glue" (0:29-0:37). Siena is a phantom, the eerie entity of capital, which is responsible *for* everything and yet cannot be *held* responsible.

Leaving Soon: "Do You Love Me Yet?" and "Keeping You Around"

"Do You Love Me Yet?" is a critique of the music industry, which employs irony to expose the inefficacy of the music industry. The track's corresponding lyric video takes place inside an empty club. The narrator is "in", but is conflicted about their belonging there. They simultaneously condemn many of the "club's", the industry's, practices, but are unable to

completely disconnect from the club: they become a ghost inside it. The bridge of the song, in which Mason again raises his voice to spirit-like octaves, highlights the ghost-making of the narrator: “Let me in the world above / If there’s nothing of me . . . What’s left when I’m gone?” (2:56-3:09). The world above is the higher rank, the higher monetary value, but also the ascending of the spirit out of the body. “Don’t stop, give it to me / I want it all, I” (3:19-3:26).

“Talking To Myself” is markedly lonely and uncertain. Its emphasis on the narrator’s solitude and pessimism for the future go hand in hand. The narrator has seemingly fallen short of some goal: references to the music industry again imply the same narrator from “Do You Love Me Yet?”, and the line “And now the zero equals nothing” references the fictional band within *Dead Club City*. This fictional band has become worthless, meaningless, or disappeared entirely. The meaninglessness of monetary gain has also been revealed: the exponential growth, represented by zeroes added to the ends of numbers, has stopped bringing the narrator anything but a vague, surface-level survival, distinctly lacking the kind of “livingness” Han describes (50).

In the first verse, the narrator considers all their lost potential, which they lost due to weakness. At the end of the verse, they seem to fall into a doubt that is a level deeper still: “Things could have been right / But I don’t know, maybe none of those things” (1:06-1:13). Fisher has written extensively about the relationship between capitalism and desire, including in a lecture series later transcibed in *Poscapitalist Desire.* Referencing Mark Zuckerberg starting Facebook, Fisher points out Zuckerberg himself might not have known why he started Facebook, but that “something might know. That’s the thing. Capital can know, right? Capital can know, because capital is like evolution: it selects for things. Capital has agency” (134). It seems the narrator of “Talking To Myself” has similarly lost sight of or hope for whatever they initially sought: they have cracked under the demands of the music industry and let go of any vision that previously drove them: “Someone’s cause on the megaphone / Maybe if I’d paid more attention, I’d have seen my own” (2:05-2:09). The song’s industry fatigue is amplified by its reference to “Do You Love Me Yet?”, where the narrator recognizes in the second verse “You don’t love me tonight” (2:10-2:14).

The individualistic achivement society culture which permiates the DCC as well as reality manifests in a complex relationship with responsibility, blame, and guilt. Capital’s agency, despite its strength, can not be subjected to guilt the same way people can. In an achievement society, failure is turned inwards and seen as an inadequacy of the self, rather

than a matter of luck or a corrupt system. Individual blame is part of what keeps the achievement society running:

> Auto-compulsion, which presents itself as freedom, takes the place of allo-compulsion. This development is closely connected to capitalist relations of production. . . . Achievement society is the society of self-exploitation. The achievement-subject exploits itself until it burns out. (Han 47)

Further, Han connects this self-exploitation with life's "stripping of all narrativity" (50). The analysis hence returns to time and the future: "The general denarrativization of the world is reinforcing the feeling of fleetingness" (Han 18). When every second is accounted for in terms of capital, every moment can be valued in capital terms, their coherence outside of capital falls apart, destroying the potential for a trajectory of the future leading beyond capitalism. Throughout the album, 'blame' for the present conditions is hard to pin down: in track 3, the narrator asks "Who have you got left to blame?" (0:28-0:33). In track 4, the question becomes "But how much blame can we take, babe?" (0:30-0:36). In track 10, the narrator, the accusation turns inwards: "But maybe I'm just passing blame" (0:46-0:48). Finally, in track 11, the narrator seems to pass blame equally onto theirself and others: "But who am I to chastise you? / Yeah, who am I to say when I'm guilty of it too? / Who am I for judging you? / Who am I to say it, when I play my songs for you?" (2:31-3:09).

The inability to properly place down blame reflects the "centerlessness of capitalism" (*Capitalist Realism* 63). Many of the songs grapple with feelings of guilt, or placing blame on others or the self. In the DCC, positive feelings are to be gained through consumption; they are to be bought from the city, not from other people. Negative feelings are to be turned inwards, to the individual's inability to maximize their potential. Blame has to be directed towards an individual. Fisher describes the situation as follows in *Postcapitalist Desire*:

> But now there is no freedom from the imperatives of capital. And, as I say, it's kind of a voluntary compulsion, right? If that makes sense... I've just thought that [those terms are contradictory]... But nobody makes you, in that sense. Nobody makes you own a phone. And if you do own it, nobody makes

> you go on social media. And, of course, if you're on social media, then you are producing for capitalism. (132)

The 'free' participation of users in social media and its ultimate convenience shifts users' daily lives into the digital realm. As a result, they vacate the premises, often physical, public spaces, which used to foster those connections which now, ought to be more conveniently and efficiently achieved online: "And the result of that is this kind of atomisation; of people falling back into their own private sphere" (133). Capitalism cannot allow for time to be spent doing things inefficiently, even if that inefficient activity would be pleasurable for the doer: this includes the inefficiency of dealing with physical distance. However, this demand of efficiency then ironically creates bigger physical distances between people who otherwise might have connected in person. As Fisher puts it: "Look, it's not that fucking hard for me to talk to you! It's not that hard! But it is hard if I've got no time." (131) In track 4, "Keeping You Around", the two narrators, who arrived in the DCC together, are torn apart after being superficially, hedonistically, distracted by others: "Your lips want anyone else / Mine taste like everyone else / Oh, that's a tragedy / Try not to pity myself / You fall back into yourself" (0:01-0:12). The narrator's struggle is with feeling pity, while the other retreats into themselves. This asymmetry is relfected in the first two lines: the love interest's disconnect is based on an unfulfilled desire, but the narrator has already given into the temptation of 'everyone else', which has left residue on their mouth.

The connections between capital, time, memory, and connection are intricate. *Dead Club City* certainly appeals to the moral and political exhaustion driven by the instantenous information networks of the 21st century media landscape, which leave no second unaccounted for, and where opportunities to do good are endless, and as they are as convenient as any other interaction, they become obligations: the proposition is that global crises can be fought by clicking, streaming, liking, sharing, and commenting on the right pieces of media. The characters' apathy in the face of disconnect and individualism

In "Keeping You Around", the band references its own album *Broken Machine* and its titular single from 2017. Nothing But Thieves' self-references, scattered throughout lyrics and melodies across their discography, create a version of historicity for their listeners.

CHAPTER 3: HOPE – The Rock Is My Lord: Voice, Imagination, and the Future

If time is a dimension, a supporting structure of our existence, its warping raises dire concerns for our connection to the world and each other. The use of sound and the human voice is especially prominent throughout the album. Both production and reception of sound are portrayed, as they are, key elements in the music industry, but also in forming connection and trust between individuals.

In *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher outlines political action he sees as having potential for displacing capitalism, or, "rid[ding] public services of business ontology" (80). This riddance, he presses, has to be postcapitalist: "an effective anticapitalism must be a rival to Capital, not a reaction to it; there can be no return to pre-capitalist territorialities" (79). In his lecture series, he fleshes out the difficulty in looking for such postcapitalisms in relation to primitivity. A key pillar of capitalism is its ability to represent anything with an equivalent amount of capital. Exchanges that disregard the transcribing of value into monetary terms (here, gift-giving), then, resist capitalism: "If I give you something and you respond with something else, what is the metric that would make those things equivalent? There isn't anything. This is what Baudrillard says. This is the logic of the gift" (*Postcapitalist Desire* 173). The thing that prevents movement beyond capitalism is that a divide between desire and capital is impossible. Fisher quotes Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy*, page 108: "there is no external reference . . . where desire would be clearly legible, where its *proper economy* would not be scrambled" (173-174). However, as presented in previous chapters, capitalist economies' promises of interpreting and responding to human desires are repeatedly broken. In *Dead Club City*, the narrators are repeatedly let down by the solutions capital provides for their desires, as seen in the previous chapter. The optimisms of the album thereby lie in illegibility, in noise, and self-sacrifice.

It Spoke To Me: "Overcome" and "Foreign Language"

Track 2, "Overcome", within the album context is about ambition and moving towards the Dead Club City, spurred on by a desire for change. The falling behind of the stranger, rather than implying that there are unknown or unknowable persons whose abandoning is necessary for progress, implies that rather what should be left behind is the idea of them being a

stranger, i.e. progress comes from de-strangifying the people around you. This is not done through rational understanding, however, but through the voice.

Track 9, "Foreign Language", emphasizes this connection through the voice of another person. The relationship between the narrator and their lover seems to be built on difference and misalignment, which are centralized from the very first lines: "Sometimes I don't understand you / Same road, just different direction / Same note, but different vibration / I've gotta admit / You're not all it seems" (0:26-0:35). The characters of the song are on different trajectories. Further, their voices are different, even when they have the same note. This difference, in combination with the chorus' lines "It's a foreign language to me, baby / But I love hearing you talk" (1:07-1:15), prioritizes connection over understanding. Instead of the voice being merely a tool for communicating one's mind, Adriana Cavarero sees value in its mere resonance and hearing, beyond its function in representing language. In *For More Than One Voice*, Cavarero criticizes a kind of historical deafness resulting from the prioritization of speech and language:

> This inability to listen has many pernicious consequences. For example, it makes it so that even those philosophies that value "dialogue" and "communication" remain imprisoned in a linguistic register that ignores the relationality already put in action by the simple reciprocal communication of voices. (16)

The voice here is a reminder to the narrator of their connection and mutual dedication, which are prevailing forces over a sense of shared ambition, which is the point of connection for the characters taking a journey towards the DCC in "Overcome", for example. The DCC was supposed to be "a new planet", but now they no longer agree on its goodness, though the narrator has sympathy for the other: "You've got planets in your eyes / Guess it's not my thing / But you make it look alright" (0:40-0:50).

The song's reference to the 1960 movie *L'avventura* ("L'avventura dream / I hear it call you in the night" (1:47-1:54)) . . . *L'avventura* focuses on a budding romance between Claudia and Sandro, whose friend Anna disappears mysteriously on a group vacation and is never seen again. The friends travel through landscapes similar to the Dead Club City in their unnatural, hostile hauntedness, and their interactions with other people are strange and cold. A "L'avventura dream" therefore might be a desire to disappear, as Anna does, or perhaps to

go on a long winding journey with another in search of something other yet: a person, or perhaps just another goal. Either way, this dream is not seemingly shared by the narrator, who is *made* to watch these "movies from the old days". The compulsion in "Foreign Language" is not similar to the desire compulsions of achievement societies: its compulsive power is not for convenience or proximity, as it is clear the narrator does not personally partake in the L'avventura dream or share it with their lover.

The album's imagery seems to deny outright spirituality in favor of a more socially-minded congregationality: the heaven sold by the DCC is denied and ascension, if it even happens, turns out to be unsatisfying. The music video "Tomorrow Is Closed" criticizes the religiosity of the DCC, showing empty rows of plastic chairs and Mason's priestly character drugging the church members. The implication is not, therefore, that music itself is an object worthy of worship, since that kind of worship (as represented in the DCC) is hollow and illusory: rather the nature of music reveals intuitions, bodily intelligence, and proximity to the other in a way that highlights trust and connection, and this process can function as a unifying power similar to religion. Nothing But Thieves do not suggest themselves to be the best ones or the only ones to awaken this sensibility, but rather their message can be generalized into other musical acts as well.

No One Up There: "Pop The Balloon"

"Pop the Balloon" is sonically and structurally the most experimental track of the album, with its off-set rhythms, heavy distortion guitar, and Mason's vocal performance approaching incomprehensible at times. It is grainy, grungry, and *noisy*. The track represents the newly found mutation of sound, brought about from catastrophe, but distinctly human. In the terms of Jacques Attali, this is the "catastrophe point" for the Dead Club City, which ultimately "frees the listener's imagination" (33). Attali writes on the ritual nature of music, and its sacrificing: (25-26) Nothing But Thieves' use of religious imagery reflects the power it holds in society. Music can occupy a position similar to religion, when that religion has been banished by rationality: "Music appears in myth as an affirmation that society is possible"; "Music is a strategy running parallel to religion" (29-30). Music is a gentler phantom than God or capital, and connection is at the heart of revolution. The destruction of the DCC in "Pop the Balloon" is explicitly made with the interests of another in mind: "Pop the balloon / Do it for you / Kill the Dead Club City" (0:02-0:08).

As the album ends at the destruction of the DCC, it does not propose a postcapitalist society to take the DCC's place. However, this is where the live performance, the manifestation of the DCC's storyline in-concert, again has to be considered, as the track gains new meanings after it is moved. The repositioning of "Overcome" into the end of the concert resets the route that brought the song's characters into the Dead Club City and pulls the audience into the story, this time equipped with knowledge of the future of the characters. As such, it invites them to consider forming a route towards the future that takes into account 'what happened last time', so to speak. Notably, this is not suggesting a return to pre-capitalist conditions: rather, it sonically revives for the live audience the process of hope. "We don't always get all that we want / Redefine the pain to something more" (0:42-0:47) is an alternative reading to Han's achivement society, recognizing that there are desires which systems of capital cannot satisfy. The pain of the unmet desire then drives the narrators forward: "And we shall overcome as we've done before" (0:50-0:53). Notably, this follows after the realization of capitalism as an inadequate authority in satisfying those desires, contrary to its self-presentation and comparable to the Dead Club City's advertisement in track 1. Hauntological music in Fisher's terms is about longing for the kind of hope past societies had for futures outside of capitalism: "the hopes created by postwar electronica or by the euphoric dancec music of the 1990s have evaporated – not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible" (*Ghosts of My Life* 19). In *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher outlines political action he sees as having potential for displacing capitalism, or, "rid[ding] public services of business ontology" (80). This riddance, he presses, has to be postcapitalist: "an effective anticapitalism must be a rival to Capital, not a reaction to it; there can be no return to pre-capitalist territorialities" (79). By moving the audience into the point of departure within the story with the knowledge that the implied destination is a false paradise, the performance calls for listeners to see an open road to a future outside of capitalism.

CONCLUSION

The future is not cancelled, it runs toward us. It may be closed, and this collision might have knocked the world off its feet for a moment. Still, the future can be re-opened. Desiring the future means we must desire space, we must desire time, and we must desire connection. Relinquishing those three things makes them into ghosts. Devaluing them, and throwing the struggle over them to corporate mediators, has degraded our sense of ownership of them. Your time does not belong to you, you must buy some. You have no place in the world, you must buy one. You are not connected to the flow of life, but we can offer a subscription for that. The album underlines how poorly the Dead Club City and similarly arranged capitalist societies are able to satisfy desires, only providing band-aid solutions. The imposition of these systems, the movement into the Dead Club City, was made in pursuit of desire fulfillment and a hope for a better future. Capitalism's hijacking of those desires need not be eternal, there is still hope for restoring agency to the people.

In "The spectralities reader", Giorgio Agamben writes in his chapter "On the Uses and Disadvantages of Living among Specters" about Venice, and the process by which it has died and become a specter—specifically, a 'larval' one. The specter of Venice refuses to acknowledge its own dying. Agamben ends his article with proposing a compassion between the city's specter and its "beggars", "rats", and "rare people":

> Since what the specter argues, with its choirboy-like voice, is that if all the cities and all the languages of Europe now survive only as phantasms, then only those who have understood these most intimate and most familiar deeds, only those who recite and record the discarnate words and stones, will perhaps be able one day to reopen that breach in which history—in which life—suddenly fulfills its promise. (476)

This reopening is the next step for the inhabitants of the Dead Club City. The most intimate and most familiar deeds are those to do with the voice: the vocal chords and the eardrums are not visible on the human body. As mediators of recognition, they are more visceral.

Musical nostalgia across genres seem to take hold around the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in the re-emergence of the vinyl as a relatively commonplace item in merch stands.

The motivations behind this move are presently unclear, as streaming continues to dominate modes of playing recorded music: it is possible 21st century vinyls are collectible novelties sooner than they are political or philosophical expressions that seek to dismantle the domination of streaming-based music consumption and its system of disbelonging characteristic of the kinds of ownership-degrading societies Auken wrote on. Perhaps, however, the return towards physical mediums has other implications: for example, it might predict increasing demand to interpret albums as wholes, instead of merely collections of song after song. This might also correlate with shifts in understandings of time: rather than accumulations of moments with a set monetary value, time itself might be approached as a larger whole, and the meaningful connections between moments might begin to be appreciated more.

Further, as Attali sees it, a key concept in moving past the representation era of music is its production for the sole purpose of pleasure for the musician. This pleasure, however, extends beyond individualistic or hedonistic drives and into imagination: “Any noise, when two people decide to invest their imaginary and their desire in it, becomes a potential relationship, future order” (Attali 143). The night of a major concert, concertgoers may recognize each other on train station platforms and bus stops. There is a look, an air, that awakens suspicion of a common destination, which then gets affirmed after each stop, at the point of disembarkment, and all the way to the venue. It often goes unacknowledged. We do not know each other, but we know we are headed the same way. This is knowledge enough.

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