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Research Article

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Liquid Realism: Hauntology, Lack, and Mourning as Method

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Abstract: This article proposes liquid realism as a term to describe a critical stance that constitutes a meta-modern methodology. Drawing on Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity, Mark Fisher's hauntology, and Jacques Lacan's conception of the real as structural lack, liquid realism reframes realism not as representational fidelity but as a practice of encounter with instability and absence. Set against both postmodern relativism and the metaphysical solidity sought by new realisms, liquid realism positions mourning rather than melancholia as the ethical stance adequate to a world shaped by precarity and cancelled futures. The article situates liquid realism within metamodern oscillation, articulating a realism that embraces fantasy, desire, and imagination as necessary mediations rather than exclusions. Through analyses of reactionary nostalgia and David Southwell's Hookland as counter-folkloric practice, the article demonstrates how realism can resist the lure of restorative myth while cultivating reparative forms of critique. Liquid realism suggests a metamodern realism grounded in lack and capable of sustaining political, literary, and imaginative engagement under conditions of liquidity.

Keywords: metamodernism; hauntology; lack; mourning; folklore; realism

1 Introduction

To speak of realism in the early twenty-first century is to enter a conceptual terrain defined less by solidity than by dissolution. The familiar anchors of social and political life no longer hold with the force they once claimed. We inhabit a moment shaped by volatility, precarity and a pervasive sense of fragmentation. Any attempt to articulate realism today must therefore begin from the recognition that the conditions under which realism once operated have changed and, as is argued here, have liquefied. This essay proposes liquid realism as a methodological response to those conditions. Liquid realism does not seek to restore metaphysical firmness or to retreat into postmodern relativism. Instead, it approaches reality through its instability, its absences, and its hauntological remnants. It argues that the contemporary moment demands not new foundations but rather new ways of navigating a world in which foundations no longer persuade. Realism, in this sense, becomes less a method of representation than a practice of encounter. It becomes a way of attending to the world as it bends and persists under conditions of liquidity.

By liquid realism I mean a critical and narrative orientation that recognises the instability, fragmentation, and contingency of contemporary social life without retreating into nostalgic fantasies of coherence. Rather than seeking to restore a lost past or impose a rigid explanatory framework, liquid realism treats uncertainty itself as the condition through which cultural, social, political, and imaginative life must now be understood and narrated. It is a mode of realism grounded in lived experience rather than metaphysical certainty, and it treats mourning as an ethical stance adequate to a world in which solidity can no longer be assumed.

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2 Situating Liquid Realism

The argument unfolds at a moment when naming the contemporary condition has itself become a competitive theoretical field. This is a proliferation that is itself symptomatic of the instability being diagnosed. Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of liquid modernity, Mark Fisher's account of cancelled futures, and the Lacanian real's insistence through absence each illuminate aspects of the present's instability. At the same time, metamodernism's oscillatory structure of feeling and Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm's process social ontology describe how cultural forms persist amid flux. Liquid realism draws these threads together, not to stabilise the world they describe, but to articulate a method adequate to their tensions. Central to this method is mourning rather than melancholia. Where reactionary politics clings melancholically to idealised pasts, liquid realism insists on the necessity of acknowledging loss without seeking restoration. To mourn is to remain with the world as it is, which is fragmented, unresolved, and haunted by the ghosts of abandoned futures, while refusing both despair and nostalgic reconstruction. Liquid realism therefore positions mourning as a commitment to a world that cannot be made whole.

What follows situates liquid realism within the pressures of late modernity and outlines the conceptual terrain from which it emerges. It argues that realism today must be reflexive, historically situated, and must recognise that the real is not a stable ground beneath ideology but the point at which our narratives encounter their limits. Liquid realism begins from that encounter and asks how we might think, act, and imagine from within it. Beginning with the problem of realism in liquid modernity, this article moves through engagements with new realist philosophies and metamodern theory. It seeks to ground itself in psychoanalytic understandings of the Lacanian real. It situates itself in the socio-temporal dislocations of late modern life and concludes with demonstrations of liquid realist praxis in reactionary myth-making and counter-folkloric cultural production. Liquid realism is then proposed here as a methodology of attending to reality through its instability and its hauntological residues, without retreating into metaphysical solidity or postmodern relativism.

It is important to note that liquid realism does not claim to identify an entirely unprecedented cultural condition. The entanglement of realism with 'liquidity' and a form of hauntology has earlier precedents that both anticipate and enrich the argument. For example, Ross Chambers' *Melancholy and Opposition* (1993) analyses this conjunction in mid-nineteenth-century French writing. He identifies where authors engaged in forms of melancholic realism that resisted both conservative and progressive appropriations of folk tradition. Also, the cinematic use of Poetic Realism in France in the 1930s also organised its aesthetic around similar themes. Gilles Deleuze's account in *Cinema 1* (2005) as 'molar' versus 'molecular' perception anticipates the liquid/solid distinction operative here:

...the perception image was not to be reflected in a formal consciousness, but was to be split into two solid states, one molecular and the other molar, one liquid and the other solid, one drawing along and effacing the other.¹

Deleuze develops the argument to identify the function of forms of narrative in constituting cinematic realism. 'On this level, it [realism] does not exclude fiction or even dream. It can include the fantastic, the extraordinary, the heroic and above all melodrama.'² Crucially, Derrida's original conception of hauntology in *Specters of Marx* draws not only on Marx's famous observation that 'all that is solid melts into air' but also on the figure of Ophelia drowned in water, and on Hamlet's sense that 'the time is out of joint'. This suggests that the liquid-hauntological condition is not a uniquely late-modern phenomenon but a recurrent historical experience as it also has specific contemporary manifestations. Liquid realism, then, does not claim to name something wholly new, but to provide a methodological response adequate to the specific form that liquidity takes in the present. Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2000) provides the structural grounding for what follows.

Liquid realism builds on metamodernism's oscillatory structure of feeling by extending its implications into epistemic and political practice. Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) describe a sensibility organised around

¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 82.

² Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, 145. See also Dudley Andrew's study of the aesthetics of regret, *Mists of Regret* (1995).

oscillation, a back-and-forth movement between the earnestness and conviction of modernist aims and post-modernism's celebration and use of irony. This oscillation is not merely stylistic, although it is evident in cultural artefacts; it is uncomfortable in that it recognises that belief and doubt coexist and, perhaps more troublingly, that hope and scepticism are bound together. Where metamodernism identifies a 'structure of feeling', liquid realism asks what kinds of thought become possible within that structure. Where metamodernism is largely diagnostic in mapping the push and pull of contemporary experience, liquid realism aims to be methodological, concerned with the craft of navigating reality within oscillation. Raymond Williams' work reminds us that realism is never a timeless doctrine but cultural practice embedded in historical conditions, and in '... the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization.'³ I draw here on his cultural materialism as a methodological model rather than claiming his direct authority for philosophical realism. For Williams, realism was a mode of fidelity to lived experience, shaped by the pressures of social life and the structures of feeling that emerge within it. His cultural materialism insisted that forms of representation are inseparable from the material and historical contexts that produce them. Liquid realism inherits this attentiveness but departs from Williams in its insistence that the present is defined less by continuity than by instability and an eerie spectral (hauntological) presence/absence; '... by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence.'⁴ In this sense, liquid realism extends Williams' project into a terrain where fidelity means not only attending to lived experience but also to the ghosts of futures foreclosed and solidarities dissolved and, importantly, even to fantasies. This is where the term realism matters, having been presumed to imply fidelity to an independently existing world, unaltered by interpretation. In this analysis it denotes something subtler and more historically responsive and something which resists totalisation.

The realism outlined here understands the world as neither utterly malleable nor definitively fixed.⁵ Instead, reality possesses a liquid quality, impossible to grasp and yet never entirely escaping transformation. Liquid realism is then a practice of attending to the world through its liquidity and recognising that reality is unstable and is ridden with loss. While adjacent frameworks including critical realism, affect theory, and certain strands of feminist materialism engage similar concerns, liquid realism's specific contribution lies in its methodological synthesis of liquid modernity, hauntology, and Lacanian theory as a navigational practice within metamodern oscillation. Feminist new materialists such as Karen Barad (2007) and Rosi Braidotti (2011) have theorised intra-action, and nomadic subjectivity as alternatives to substance ontology, while postcolonial theorists including Édouard Glissant (1997) and Achille Mbembe (2001) have demonstrated how colonial violence produces fractured temporalities and haunted landscapes. Liquid realism shares these frameworks' rejection of the fixed and their attention to processual reality, but differs in other respects.⁶ First, its explicit grounding in the psychoanalytic real as constitutive lack rather than generative becoming; second, its focus on late-modern Euro-American conditions of liquefaction as culturally and historically specific rather than ontologically universal; and third its methodological emphasis on mourning and hauntology as responses to foreclosed futures rather than on resistance. Where feminist and postcolonial materialisms often rightly emphasise emergence, creativity, and resistance, liquid realism attends to loss and spectral persistence as generative – to be discussed in due course particularly in relation to Southwell's Hookland. These are complementary rather than competing projects: liquid realism addresses conditions where solidity has dissolved in contexts that once claimed it, while postcolonial thought addresses contexts where imposed 'solidity' was always a colonial fiction masking violent extraction and erasure.

It is the nature of that loss (as real and/or narrativised) that is central to the argument presented here and it is this which requires further analysis. Liquid realism refuses the polarisation between solidity and dissolution and in these terms it defies binaries, not in a post-structuralist sense of endless deferment of meaning but rather

³ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 64.

⁴ Fisher, *Weird and the Eerie*, 61.

⁵ Drawing on Catherine Malabou's parallel concept of plasticity (2012).

⁶ These critics are introduced here as exemplars of debates in gender and post-colonial discourse rather than as an attempt to engage in detailed debate or critique of same. These are important aligned ideas and any debate would be most appropriately served where space allows. In establishing a critical approach this article utilised a Euro-American approach for brevity and specificity of examples, and to focus rather than limit the argument. In these terms this article is positing a method to be further developed and debated in relation to wider examples.

where both extremes can be seen. This might initially seem a nihilistic position to take, but liquid realism identifies a place where agency may be constrained but yet it still perpetuates. It recognises that institutions may be falling apart, and yet they still exert forms of power. It also importantly suggests a space where memory and imagination (and thus fictions) bleed into each other. Liquidity names and defines late modern life – things do not stay still, yet neither do they simply dissolve. From this standpoint, the task is not to establish a rigid philosophical architecture but to describe the conceptual context from which liquid realism emerges.

Three preliminary points of contention can usefully first be addressed. The first is the suspicion that liquid realism represents little more than another iteration of postmodern instability, merely couched in a sombre and hauntologically infused tone. But, whereas postmodernism revelled in the play of surfaces and the dismantling of grand narratives, liquid realism refuses that celebratory disorientation. It acknowledges instability but emphasises its social consequences. Jean-François Lyotard's account of the postmodern as a condition was never a manifesto for relativism but a diagnosis of incredulity towards grand/meta narratives. His emphasis lay in showing how modernity's legitimating stories had frayed, leaving us with fragmented discourses and localised knowledge. Liquid realism acknowledges this diagnosis but resists the celebratory uses to which some 'post-modernisms' were later put. It is not enough to revel in fragmentation, the inevitability is that we remain with the losses and absences that fragmentation produces. In this sense, liquid realism reframes Lyotard's condition as an ethical question; this is to mourn what has been foreclosed rather than to treat instability as a playground of endless deferment. In artistic terms this is the difference between improvisation born of creative freedom and improvisation forced by precarity or even fear. The second point of contention concerns political paralysis. If the world is already liquid, then surely nothing can ground action. The answer to this is that liquid realism refuses to romanticise solidity. Importantly liquid realism must also be aware of the class politics inherent in its central metaphor. This is that the celebration of fluidity and adaptability has been the ideological underpinning of neoliberalism. For those without social and economic resources liquidity is a material condition rather than an intellectual one. It can manifest itself in personal and cultural insecurity and ultimately exhaustion. Liquid realism's suggestion of a methodological embrace of fluctuation is not an endorsement of precarity but instead a refusal to pretend that stability is recoverable in terms that do not reproduce exclusion. In part it is a way of naming a problem. The longing for fixed categories, stable identities, and permanent institutions has historically aligned itself with exclusionary and authoritarian forms of politics. To accept liquidity is not to accept helplessness; instead, it asks what forms of solidarity and commitment are possible when permanence cannot be assumed. This means learning how to build structures that embrace adaptability without surrendering to cynicism. This is, of course, no easy task. The third point of contention concerns mourning. Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia (1917) is central to this argument. Melancholia clings to the lost object as though it is still present, fundamentally refusing the reality of change. (This is where hauntology, as a field of thought, becomes central.) Counter to this, mourning accepts loss and negotiates a way through it. The argument is that reactionary politics is melancholic and is perpetually summoning an idealised past to shroud the present's difficulties. But mourning enables a forward-facing form of remembrance as a way of living with ghosts that does not mistake them for guides. Liquid realism embraces mourning not as a concession to despair but as recognition of the ethical necessity of acknowledging what has been lost without seeking the impossibility of restoration. Metamodernism tells us that oscillation is the mood of our times: liquid realism asks how we might interpret the world from within the oscillation. How we might tell stories adequate to a present that refuses to dissolve into either blind optimism or hopeless despair.

Lacan's reworking of Freud clarifies why mourning is central to liquid realism. For Lacan the lost object is never just empirical; absence is the point around which the subject is organised. Melancholia arises when the subject refuses to acknowledge this loss as constitutive and instead identifies with what is lost and in turn attempts to fill the void with what cannot be recovered. Reactionary politics follows this melancholic logic. Mourning, by contrast, accepts lack is the condition of subjectivity without resorting to a fantasy that the object can ever return. This methodological commitment leads to a broader imperative: realism today needs to be reflexive and needs to acknowledge the limitations of its own claims, which is the impossibility of capturing the world in stable theoretical form. Yet reflexivity should not collapse into endless self-interrogation, which is another route to stasis. Instead, liquid realism adopts what might be seen as situated fidelity, which might be

defined as a way of remaining committed to a world we know we cannot fully know. It also accepts that knowledge is always mediated by fictions as well as facts, including fantasy, language, ideology and history. These mediations do not compromise the real, but rather they are the means by which we approach it.

Crucially, liquid realism is not anti-realist. It does not retreat into the solipsism of image culture or the relativism of ‘multiple truths.’ Rather, it argues that our engagement with reality must take seriously the forms through which reality resists us. This resistance may be social, as evident in the persistence of inequality; psychological, as instantiated in trauma; or cultural, as expressed in ‘traditions’ that carry forward the weight of history. The real, in this sense, is not the stability posited by new realisms but the site where our narratives encounter their limits.

3 The Problem of Realism in Liquid Modernity

Building on Bauman’s account of liquidity and Fisher’s analysis of capitalist realism, this section applies their ideas to liquid realism. Francis Fukuyama argued in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) that liberal democracy had resolved the ideological tensions of the twentieth century. This is a claim that functioned not only as geopolitical analysis but as a narrative position that attempted to stabilise the future’s horizon. As Fukuyama suggested, ‘...the truth is considerably more complicated, for the success of liberal politics and liberal economics frequently rests on irrational forms of recognition that liberalism was supposed to overcome.’⁷ As the decades have accumulated, this proclamation has acquired a spectral quality. Rather than a definitive conclusion to history, we find ourselves inhabiting what Mark Fisher, in his extension of Derrida’s conception of hauntology, calls ‘the slow cancellation of the future’.⁸ The sense of forward movement has faltered and we are suspended in a present.⁹

This temporal suspension is inseparable from a corresponding spatial liquefaction. Zygmunt Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity* (2000) identified the gradual erosion of what used to be solid. It is within this liquefied, temporally fragmented landscape that contemporary philosophy has attempted to argue for a return to the real. Various strands of new realism and speculative thought, from Quentin Meillassoux to Graham Harman, contend that the linguistic and cultural turns of the late twentieth century have rendered us unable to access the world beyond discourse. They offer, in response, important renewed avenues towards reality, via ancestral events, withdrawn objects, ontological pluralism, and documentary inscription. These interventions share an impulse that is as cultural as it is philosophical, which is a longing or even need to recover something firm beneath the flux. Yet in examining these projects specifically in the wider context of liquid modernity, the return to the real can resemble not just a bold philosophical innovation but also a symptom. The restoration of metaphysical solidity mirrors the cultural appeal of political movements that promise to rebuild stable borders, identities, and certainties, whilst clearly not coming from the same intent.¹⁰

Liquid realism begins from a different premise. Instead of attempting to reconstruct solidity or to locate a new metaphysical underpinning, it takes seriously the liquefied conditions of contemporary life and asks what realism might look like in their wake. This realism is not a nostalgic return but a commitment to working with the material the present provides. It is worth stressing here that liquid modernity is not merely a sociological phenomenon that arrived without agency. The dissolution of stable structures was in significant measure the result of deliberate neoliberal policy choices made by governments and corporations that could have been made otherwise. To acknowledge liquidity as a condition is not to naturalise it as fate but rather to recognise it as an imposition. The central claim is that realism today must shift from a model of representation of the world to a

⁷ Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 11.

⁸ Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 231.

⁹ It is this idea of the present looping that is the conceit of hauntological masterworks such as Richard Littler’s *Scarfolk* and David Southwell’s *Hookland*, both set in mythic counties in Britain perpetually stuck in the 1970s.

¹⁰ There is perhaps an argument to be made that this would more likely be Accelerationism, but that is a debate for another land.

model which outlines how we encounter it. The real is not the secure foundation beneath ideology; it is the limit at which our systems crack.

This leads to three interlinked questions:

Epistemological: How do we make claims about the world when our interpretive systems are provisional, yet when relativism (political, social, and ecological) has become problematic?

Ethical: How do we form commitments when liquidity ensures that institutions, relationships, and collective projects will not endure in stable form?

Political: How do we cultivate solidarity in conditions shaped by fragmentation, precarity, and the pervasive sense that the future has stalled or that the past is repeating?

Liquid realism is a way of attending to the world through its uncertainties by recognising that dwelling in liquidity does not preclude commitment, care, or critique. Rather, it requires forms of engagement that accept instability without collapsing into resignation or defeat. It attempts to tackle the difficulty of acknowledging loss without succumbing to a form of melancholic restoration, which is in itself regressive.

4 The New Realist Turn

Of course, realism has never been a single doctrine. It has occupied many philosophical, artistic, and political registers, from the nineteenth-century literary tradition to analytic metaphysics. However, it has almost always carried the promise of access to the world ‘as it is’. What distinguishes the current moment is that this promise has become strained. The contemporary return to realism is marked by a paradoxical simultaneity, which is an insistence on the independence of the world paired with a recognition that our capacity to know that world is subject to historical and conceptual limits.

Maurizio Ferraris’s documentality positions social reality as a set of durable inscriptions that exist independently of interpretation. Markus Gabriel’s ontology of multiple ‘fields of sense’ resists relativism while rejecting any single, overarching ontology. Graham Harman’s object-oriented ontology (OOO) argues that objects withdraw from all relations, whether human or non-human, preserving their autonomy in ways that defy complete access. Quentin Meillassoux breaks with correlationism by positing the absolute contingency of the world, grounding realism in the capacity of mathematics to reveal a realm independent of thought.

Despite their considerable differences, these projects share an animating and important conviction: that the world exceeds our discourse, and it is possible and necessary to re-establish philosophy’s relationship with that exterior world. Yet this conviction is often accompanied by a conceptual issue that reveals the difficulty of reasserting solidity in a liquid world. Harman’s notion of withdrawal, for example, emphasises that objects cannot be fully grasped by any relation, human or non-human. This has the important virtue of resisting the anthropocentrism of earlier epistemologies, but when OOO is applied uniformly across all entities it risks flattening distinctions that are politically and historically significant. As Jane Bennett (2010) warns, ontological equivalence can obscure the uneven distribution of power and suffering that shape the world’s material relations. Lived experience resists such flattening and the stories of objects are inseparable from the social worlds they inhabit.

These limitations do not diminish the value of the new realisms, but they reveal an important cultural and philosophical tension. The desire for solidity may be understandable in a liquid age, yet it often manifests as a retreat into metaphysical certainty. Where else is there for it to go? This mirrors the effect, although not intent, of the political desire for resolidification found in movements that promise to restore coherence, identity, and stable belonging. Peter Osborne (2015) notes that the new realisms often underplay mediation, treating reality as if it could be retrieved intact once linguistic obstructions have been cleared away. Yet mediation is not an obstacle but the very texture of social and cultural life. It is through narratives, including stories, memories, images, and practices that we navigate the world, carrying with us the traces of histories that shape our interpretations. For

example, Walter Scott's proto-realist novels drew extensively on folk traditions and popular forms without this entailing a reactionary politics. This provides an important reminder that the relationship between folk material and political tendency is historically variable rather than structurally determined.¹¹

5 Metamodernism and Process Social Ontology

If new realism attempts to reassert the real, metamodernism might be described as the cultural mood in which such reassertions unfold. Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010) characterise metamodernism as an oscillation between the poles of modernism and postmodernism. This can be characterised as a structure of feeling defined by movement rather than resolution in which hope coexists with scepticism, sincerity with irony and clear belief with self-awareness. This is not a pendulum that settles but a rhythm that persists.

Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm's *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (2021) provides a more systematic philosophical grounding. His Process Social Ontology portrays the social world not as fixed categories but as dynamic property-clusters, temporary zones of stability emerging from continuous processes of interaction. Concepts, Storm argues, gain traction through mechanisms such as mimicry, habit, and institutional embedding, rather than through metaphysical essence. Social kinds are momentarily stabilised configurations and alliances, not eternal forms. Storm's work resonates closely with liquid realism, particularly in its attention to flux and contingency. But where Storm focuses on the ontological mechanisms that allow social categories to stabilise temporarily, liquid realism asks how these categories are negotiated, and inhabited, and it asks how they are felt. It concerns the subjective and political labour of living within instability. These are the elements that can be seen as emotional oscillations, nostalgic longings and collective anxieties and ethical struggles. This distinction is crucial. Metamodernism identifies a pattern of feeling; process ontology describes how certain patterns persist despite change; liquid realism seeks to suggest how we might navigate the world from within those patterns. The sensitivity to lived experience provides the ground via human interaction with context. In brief, metamodernism is the mood, process ontology the mechanism, and liquid realism is the method.

6 The Lacanian Real and Lack

It is important to explore how Lacan's conception of the Real provides a conceptual backbone for liquid realism's understanding of reality as that which resists symbolic capture. Unlike the new realisms' search for ontological solidity, Lacanian theory presents the real as structural absence. It is a gap at the heart of subjectivity and culture that cannot be overcome. Instead of offering stability, the real marks the failure of stability and is the point where meaning breaks down. Liquid realism embraces this difficulty not as a theoretical flaw but as an ethical and epistemic imperative.

Lacan's tripartite schema of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real has become one of the most widely invoked frameworks in contemporary theory, but its implications for realism are important. In traditional philosophical discourse, the real often appears as the bedrock upon which knowledge, truth, or representation is built, but in Lacanian theory, the real is not a stable substrate. It is the impossibility that haunts every attempt at coherence. The imaginary domain provides images of wholeness and identification, and these are mirrors through which the subject recognises itself. The symbolic domain comprises language, law, and the shared structures of meaning that allow subjects to enter social life. However the real is neither image nor meaning, nor the possible, nor the impossible. It is what remains when the subject attempts to narrate their own experience and finds the narrative incomplete and fraying at the seams. As Lacan commented;

This function of the impossible is not to be approached without prudence, like any function that is presented in a negative form. I would simply like to suggest to you that the best way of approaching these notions is not to take them by negation. This method

¹¹ This is debated in detail by Geoffrey Baker (2019).

would bring us here to the question of the possible, and the impossible is not necessarily the contrary of the possible, or, since the opposite of the possible is certainly the real, we would be lead to define the real as the impossible.¹²

This impossibility does not mean unreality, rather it means that the real cannot be fully integrated into the symbolic system. It shows itself in the moments when coherence falters, which is in trauma or in desire or in the sudden emergence of something that cannot be domesticated by language. The real is not simply what escapes representation but what makes representation necessary in the first place. Subjects create fantasies not to obscure the real but to make the real present and bearable. Reality, then, is an achievement rather than a givenness; it is a fragile construction shaped around a void.

Viewed through this lens, liquid realism recognises that the world we inhabit is not anchored by immovable foundations but is structured around absences. These absences are not merely epistemological gaps. They are constitutive of subjectivity and social life and they demand engagement precisely because they cannot be resolved. This understanding opens a different path than the new realisms' search for ontological solidity; instead liquid realism proposes that realism is the labour of maintaining contact with what escapes solidity. This is the indeterminate, the traumatic, the haunting and the excessive. It is a realism that acknowledges incompleteness as its starting point.

Lacan's account of lack therefore provides the conceptual hinge connecting the article's earlier threads. It seeks to clarify why metamodern oscillation is not merely stylistic but grounded in a structural impossibility at the heart of subjectivity and why mourning, rather than melancholia, becomes the ethical stance adequate to liquid modernity. Liquid realism adopts this Lacanian insight as a methodological commitment. This is to remain with lack rather than cover it over.

7 Epistemological Matters

If the real is that which resists, then knowledge itself must be reconceived as a practice of encounter rather than control. Liquid realism therefore proposes what might be seen as a form of resistance epistemology: an approach to knowledge grounded in engagement with what pushes back against our categories.

From this discussion, three methodological principles emerge: First, the provisional without relativism. All frameworks are partial and historically situated, yet some are more adequate to the real's resistances than others. This is not a descent into 'anything goes' but a recognition that our tools for knowing the world are makeshift and require constant adjustment. What matters is whether our frameworks can accommodate the resistances they encounter, whether they bend without breaking when reality refuses to conform. Second, fantasy as necessary mediation. Fantasy is not an obstacle to realism but a precondition for any relation to the real. It is the structure through which subjects negotiate impossibility. The question, then, is not how to eliminate fantasy but how to cultivate fantasies that allow for sustained engagement rather than denial or paralysis.¹³ The ethical task is to discern which attachments remain necessary and which require reconfiguration. (Whilst beyond the scope of this article, there are profound implications for literary fictions). Third ethical fidelity to lack: Liquid realism insists that knowledge must include an awareness of what it cannot grasp. This is not a resignation to ignorance but a recognition that reality is structurally incomplete in how we experience it regardless of the existence of the real beyond. Fidelity to lack is an ethical stance, it is a commitment to acknowledging the limits of our narratives while still acting within them. It means accepting that every framework will eventually encounter something it cannot assimilate, and that this encounter is not failure but the signature of the real.

This epistemological orientation marks a shift from realism as correspondence to realism as relationship. Reality is not something we mirror but something we meet, often awkwardly, often painfully, often in ways that require new vocabularies and new forms of solidarity. In this way, liquid realism joins psychoanalysis, metamodernism, and critical theory in recognising that the real is not waiting to be recovered but must be

¹² Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 167.

¹³ Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism' (2011) is useful here where attachments can sustain us even when they impede development.

continually negotiated. It is what we encounter when the world refuses to conform to our expectations. Liquid realism suggests that to be realist today is to accept that the world is not simply a matter of what is present but also what is absent, what has been lost, what cannot be represented, and what remains unresolved. It is to recognise that these absences shape our experience as profoundly as the structures that can be named. In this sense, realism becomes an act of dwelling with the incomplete. It becomes a way of acknowledging that the true difficulty of contemporary life lies not in the absence of reality but in its refusal to stabilise, and it becomes a way of carrying that difficulty forward, into ethics, into politics, into our shared attempts to imagine a world still possible amid the ruins of certainty.

8 Liquid Modernity and Hauntology

Stories carry collective memory even when institutions vary or collapse. In that spirit, and having sketched both thinkers in the theoretical framework above, this section now develops their arguments in more focused detail. Two diagnoses of contemporary experience are central: Zygmunt Bauman's structural account of liquid modernity and Mark Fisher's temporal account of hauntological time loops. These are the spatial and the temporal dimensions of the same condition and together they provide the socio-temporal grounding that gives liquid realism its historical and experiential context.

9 Bauman's Liquid Modernity

Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2000) remains one of the most perceptive attempts to describe how contemporary life has been reshaped by the dissolution of once-enduring structures. In solid modernity, the industrial era stretching from the nineteenth century through much of the twentieth, institutions offered long-term stability; employment was usually secure; communities were more geographically rooted; political and social identities felt anchored. Life trajectories followed relatively predictable forms: education, career, family, retirement. These were not universal experiences, and they never applied evenly across class, race, ethnicity, or gender, but they nevertheless shaped the dominant cultural imagination.

Bauman argues that the solid forms of modernity began to liquefy as the century ended. The institutions that once promised cohesion, 'cradle to grave' welfare states, trade unions, and lifelong employment, buckled under the combined pressures of globalisation, financial dominance, and neoliberal restructuring. 'Flexibility' became the dominant value, celebrated by corporations and governments alike as evidence of freedom and innovation, but for individuals, this often means precarity. This shift has human consequences which include the slow wearing-down of assurances that families once took for granted and the disorientation of communities watching familiar industries vanish. The result is that long-term planning has become a privilege instead of an expectation. Liquidity is not simply a metaphor; rather it is the lived reality of people whose futures feel increasingly unmoored.

In these terms precarity has replaced stability. Work has become fragmented into contracts, gigs, and temporary arrangements. The security that once came with institutional affiliation dissolves. Individuals must repeatedly reinvent themselves, often without the resources to do so. Choice has become compulsion, given that late modernity overwhelms the individual with 'choices'. These are heralded as freedoms, yet the burden of decision-making shifts risk onto individuals. The responsibility for navigating structural instability becomes personalised. With this community starts to dissolve and gives way to 'networks' which are fluid, dynamic, easily reconfigured and which lack a sense of obligation. Crucially, as will be seen in the debate around contemporary right-wing politics, identity becomes a task which is weaponised. Instead of inheriting identities, individuals must continually assemble them. Identity becomes a project to be curated, managed, and optimised, an exhausting labour heightened by the pressures of digital culture.

The liquid modern subject becomes a pilgrim without a shrine, travelling endlessly through shifting terrains without the promise of arrival. When the world refuses to offer stability, the desire for solidity intensifies. But this

desire often manifests in regressive forms, for example the insistence on rigid borders, the nostalgia for mythic pasts and the search for simplified narratives that mask the complexity of contemporary life.

Signs of malaise are abundant and salient, yet, as Pierre Bourdieu repeatedly observes, they seek in vain a legitimate expression in the world of politics. Short of articulate expression, they need to be read out, obliquely, from the outbursts of xenophobic and racist frenzy – the most common manifestations of the ‘primal shelter’ nostalgia.¹⁴

From the perspective of liquid realism, the aim is not to deny liquidity or to romanticise it. Instead, the task is to understand how to act, think, and live within these conditions. This requires acknowledging both the losses and the possibilities that liquidity introduces. Structures dissolve, but their dissolution can open spaces for new forms of solidarity and collaboration. The challenge is discerning which forms of liquidity are emancipatory and which are destructive. Bauman himself notes this ambiguity in that liquidity can free individuals from oppressive structures, enabling experimentation and creativity, but it can also erode the collective safety nets that support vulnerable communities. Liquid realism therefore must identify both the emancipatory potential and the precariousness of contemporary life.

10 Fisher’s Hauntology and Temporal Dislocation

If Bauman provides the spatial diagnosis of a liquid world, Mark Fisher offers the temporal counterpart. In *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), Fisher weaves together cultural analysis, social observation, and personal reflection to show how contemporary life is haunted by forgotten futures, futures promised by the twentieth century but never realised. Hauntology, developed from Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994), refers to the ghosts that linger when historical possibilities are foreclosed. It is not the haunting of the present by the past, but the haunting of the present by futures that failed to materialise.¹⁵

Fisher identifies the late 1970s, early 1980s as a hinge point; the era when the post-war social settlement began to unravel, when neoliberalism took hold, when working-class cultures were dismantled, and when the utopian ambitions of earlier decades faded. From that point onward, culture increasingly turned backward through nostalgia, revival, and pastiche. This temporal shift is not merely cultural but experiential: a sensation that time has thickened, that history has ceased to unfold in recognisable arcs. The future no longer feels like an open field but like a recycling of familiar imagery. People live with the uneasy sense of being stuck, suspended, waiting for something that does not arrive. This is the failure of the future; where modernism anchored itself in the belief that the future would differ radically from the present, that confidence has dissipated and the future feels thin, unimaginable, and frightening. This results in the persistence of lost dreams including the welfare state, the space race, post-war public housing, and radical democratic movements. These were not merely policies but imaginative horizons which materially affected the lives of the population. Their collapse leaves behind ghosts as reminders of collective projects that were abandoned or dismantled and with it people were left behind. The net result is cultural stagnation. Popular culture increasingly mines its own past, producing endless remakes, retro aesthetics, and recursive recycling. Innovation persists, but it is overshadowed by an ambient nostalgia. In a further problematising of identity there are personal hauntings. Hauntology is therefore also psychological. It is the sense of never quite arriving in one’s own life but rather of being tugged backward by the (false) memory of possibility. Fisher’s insight is that hauntology is not simply a matter of longing, it is melancholic in that it is a symptom of structural and ideological defeat. The dismantling of social democratic institutions and the triumph of neoliberal economics have narrowed the horizon of political imagination. The ghosts are not comforting, rather they are reminders of what has been rendered impossible by current conditions.

¹⁴ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 214.

¹⁵ Fisher locates these hauntings in music, film, architecture, everyday melancholy, in the recurrent sense that cultural innovation has stalled, that repetition has replaced emergence. He discusses the idea of ‘...trudging through the ruins and relics...’, *Capitalist Realism* 4.

Liquid realism does not accept this form of hauntology as mere cultural melancholy. It treats the ghosts as epistemic indicators, signals of unresolved contradictions. Hauntology is not merely an aesthetic but a way of recognising which historical possibilities remain alive, however diminished they may be. Hauntology, in this sense, becomes an ethical matter. To attend to the ghosts is to acknowledge that the present is unfinished. It is to recognise that history does not vanish when structures fail, rather it persists in memory and in affect, and also in popular cultural artefacts. This hauntological persistence is also evident in Lacanian thinking; the ghost is not just a remanent of the past, it is also the return of the real. Fisher's 'lost futures' are not simply what could have been halted by political choices, they are also encounters with what can be narrativised and what eludes the process of narrative unity and, with it, the simplicity of story. To live with ghosts is to live with what cannot be fully articulated.

11 Connecting Liquidity and Haunting

Bauman and Fisher illuminate different yet interconnected aspects of late modernity. Liquidity describes the loosening of structures and hauntology describes the jammed temporality that results. Together, they reveal a world where individuals must navigate both instability/flux and stasis/repetition. This can be portrayed through overlapping stories. A worker whose job changes twice a year because the company restructures; a town hollowed out by deindustrialisation, its factory now a distribution hub staffed by precarious labour; a generation whose cultural output is saturated with analogue nostalgia, vinyl, vintage aesthetics and synthetic recreations of sounds from decades they never lived through.

The implications for realism are important:

- The collapse of linear narratives: While not universal, many realist traditions have operated within a framework of temporal coherence, presuming a stable relationship between past, present, and future that liquid modernity now unsettles. In liquid-hauntological conditions, linear temporality breaks down.
- The instability of meaning: When institutions no longer provide reliable structures and when time fails to offer direction, meaning becomes a precarious construction. This does not entail nihilism, but it demands a realism attuned to contingency.
- The temptation and lure of resolidification: In such conditions, reactionary movements flourish by promising stability. National myths are revived; imagined pasts are weaponised; borders harden; and cultural identities are purified. These are political strategies but they are also affective responses to liquid-hauntological anxiety. This is why they are so dangerous.
- The need for a realism that recognises ghosts: Liquid realism insists that a world shaped by loss, instability, and spectral persistence requires a form of realism capable of attending to absence as well as presence. A realism that acknowledges the work of mourning as generative without collapsing into melancholia.
- Action without guarantees: Perhaps most importantly, liquid realism must offer a way to act without the reassurance of stable structures or clear futures. The conditions of liquidity and haunting demand forms of political engagement that embrace uncertainty rather than deny it. What distinguishes this from other non-teleological political analyses is liquid realism's specific articulation of mourning, hauntological temporality and lack in grounding political engagement in fidelity to what the present's own losses reveal rather than in the promise of a recovered past or an arriving future.

This is where the psychoanalytic understanding of mourning intersects with the socio-temporal conditions of late modernity. To mourn is to acknowledge loss without clinging to fantasies of restoration. It is to accept that the structures we relied upon are gone, but also to recognise that their absence opens new terrains of possibility. Fundamentally liquid realism is shaped by flux and haunted by futures that never arrived, and yet is committed to the labour of imagining futures still possible.

12 Reactionary Nostalgia and Counter-Mythmaking

Having established the theoretical foundations of liquid realism, it is important to turn, however briefly, to demonstrations of how this framework operates in cultural and political practice. Two case studies illuminate different aspects of liquid realist engagement: reactionary nostalgia shows how the far right weaponises folklore to deny historical rupture, and Hookland demonstrates a metamodern counter-practice that embraces multiplicity and historical trauma in the creation of folklore.

13 Folklore, Nostalgia, and Reactionary Fantasy

The political resurgence of the far right has been accompanied by a remarkable aesthetic phenomenon: the re-enchantment of tradition through digital means. Folklore, myth, and pastoral imagery circulate as emblems of authenticity and rootedness, offering affective refuge from global precarity.

Michael Dylan Foster and Jeffrey A. Tolbert's work on the 'folkloresque', describes popular culture's appropriation and reinvention of folkloric materials and thus provides crucial analytical tools for understanding how the far right weaponises tradition. Tolbert and Foster distinguish the folkloresque from earlier dismissive concepts like 'fakelore,' arguing that when popular culture invokes folklore, it requires specific interrogation. This framework proves particularly illuminating when applied to contemporary ethnonationalism. As scholars analysing films like *Midsommar* have demonstrated using Tolbert's concept, the folkloresque enables reactionary movements to manufacture apparently authentic traditions that have 'no distinguishable or material roots' yet function to naturalise exclusionary ideologies. The film's fictional Swedish commune embodies this process in claiming ancient continuity through ritualised violence and mythic imagery, but as Stacey Anh Baran discusses, these practices are recent fabrications retrofitted onto an imagined Viking past.¹⁶ This parallels how neo-Confederate monuments erected during Jim Crow falsely claim Civil War historicity, or how contemporary far-right movements across Europe invoke 'timeless' folk traditions that are themselves modern constructions. Tolbert's critical intervention challenges the popular misuse of 'folk' to mean 'backwards, conservative, rural, isolated people who are somehow outside of the ordinary flow of time and modernity,' when folk actually 'just means people'.¹⁷

This exposes how the folkloresque becomes a technology of ethnonationalist fantasy. By projecting invented traditions backward onto a mythic past, reactionary movements create the illusion of organic, racially pure communities that never existed. This is not to suggest that reactionary movements literally believe in a recoverable, homogeneous past; rather, their use of folklore functions rhetorically, mobilising selective images of tradition as instruments of affective closure and political boundary-drawing. What distinguishes these appropriations is not the politically widespread use of folklore itself but the way such narratives are instrumentalised to foreclose plurality, fix identity, and convert cultural memory into exclusionary political capital. Where liquid realism's hauntological approach maintains relationship with actual historical ruptures and lost futures, the far right's deployment of the folkloresque attempts to deny rupture entirely, using fabricated folklore to suture over the constitutive discontinuities of modernity itself. Yet not all appeals to tradition function identically. Indigenous movements mobilising ancestral knowledge against colonial erasure operate differently from white nationalist invocations of 'European heritage.' The former asserts continuity as resistance to ongoing erasure; the latter fabricates continuity to mask historical rupture.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, reactionary nostalgia exemplifies what Freud (1899) called 'screen memories', recollections that displace trauma by idealising the past. The far right's invocation of timeless organic community conceals the historical ruptures and violences constituting modernity. Its appeal lies not in historical

¹⁶ Baran, 'Once upon a Midsomer ...', 2023.

¹⁷ Tolbert cited in 'Folk Horror Closes In on Humanity's Greatest Fear: Itself', 2024. This interview with Tolbert summarises and succinctly presents the issue of the representation of 'the folk'. See also Tolbert 'The Frightening Folk An Introduction to the Folkloresque in Horror', 2023.

accuracy but in affective efficacy. It promises wholeness where the real has imposed division. In terms of liquid modernity, reactionary nostalgia represents a symptomatic (and seemingly logical) response to liquefaction. Where liquid modernity dissolves stable communities, identities, and meanings, fascist movements promise resolidification through blood, soil, and mythic heritage. This is why far-right movements are obsessed with purity as the fantasy of a body politic without internal divisions. Hauntologically, reactionary nostalgia attempts to domesticate ghosts by pretending that the dead can be resurrected. It claims unbroken continuity with a past that was itself a construct, erasing the ruptures and transformations that constitute actual history. Where hauntological realism maintains relationship with lost futures as ghosts, acknowledging their death while preserving their disruptive potential, reactionary nostalgia resurrects the dead as zombies, animated corpses performing life while lacking its genuine vitality. This can be seen in UK politics as exemplars of right-wing political movements across Europe and the USA.

In Lacanian terms, reactionary nostalgia might be understood as an imaginary formation that attempts to cover for the structural lack at the heart of subjectivity. An idealised past functions as a fantasy object (an *objet petit a*) that promises wholeness precisely because this is impossible. What is yearned for is not a precise recoverable historical moment but the fantasy of a world in which lack does not feature. This is in part why reactionary narratives are so popular and compelling. They offer a screen that covers the real and they become the point where symbolic structures fall away. Liquid realism suggests that to cling to an imagined past or community is to deny the constitutive absence that helps to shape individuals and communities. The task is not to repair the lost object but to see that its loss is structural. In these terms political projects that are built on this are doomed to repetition.

Contemporary British politics offers instructive examples of how different formations respond to the anxieties of liquid modernity and importantly these responses do not map neatly onto a simple left/right axis. For example, both Restore UK and Reform UK's rhetoric trades in stories of national diminishment. They summon and narrativise an imagined Britain of settled identities and coherent communities from fragments of wartime stoicism, Churchillian exceptionalism, and heavily mythologised social unity that functions as a form of folklore for the late-modern electorate. Yet the nostalgic orientation is not exclusive to the populist right. The current Labour government's repeated invocations of what 'Britain really is' perform a comparable operation, substituting a different mythology of national essence for substantive political imagination. This discourse is framed in managerial-technocratic categories that present themselves as timeless and self-evident and as inevitable to chart the future. Both are, in Fisher's terms, forms of capitalist realism in being the management of expectations within a narrative of a future that presents itself as fixed. This parallel was anticipated in the Blair government's 'Cool Britannia' project, which assumed that a managerial approach to culture could substitute for structural change. What distinguishes the more explicitly reactionary version is not nostalgia per se but its specific deployment of cultural exclusion as the mechanism of resolidification. This is to varying degrees its willingness to identify 'outsiders' as the agents of liquefaction. It should also be noted that right-wing political parties are not ethnically uniform in their membership or prospective candidates. The reactionary quality of their politics lies in their structural logic rather than in any simple demographic purity. What this form of politics trades on is implication rather than declaration. They suggest a universal national narrative which 'of course' is universally understood, and it naturally never declares this as a fantasy. What parties such as Reform UK appear to offer in this framing is less a programme of renewal than a choreography of recoil. Its project substitutes affect for analysis, proposing that a return to an enchanted past might arrest the vertigo of living in late capitalism's shifting ground. In this sense, right wing parties exemplify what might be termed melancholic politics as a longing not for the future foreclosed by liquid modernity, but for a past conjured into spectral animation. Hauntological liquid realism accepts the ghost as ghost, an encounter with loss that may still unsettle the present. Reform UK, by contrast, resurrects the past as zombie – animated, mobile, and strangely performative, yet devoid of the very life force it claims to restore. The appeal of this story lies not in any credible recovery of 'tradition' but in its capacity to soothe the psychic abrasion of historical discontinuity. This can be seen in the narrative of Brexit, now recognised for its disastrous economic effects being transferred to a parallel fantasy narrative about the European Court of Human Rights. It promises resolidification, borders, sovereignty, a stabilised national mythos, precisely at the moment when such solidity has become structurally unattainable. What emerges is less a political vision

than a cultural symptom. It is a ritualised defence against the anxieties generated by the liquid conditions of contemporary Britain.

The success of Reform UK, Restore UK and other similar political movements reveals something crucial about liquid modernity. The dissolution of stable structures creates a demand for narratives that can make sense of disorientation. When legitimate institutions fail to provide such simple and thus compelling narratives, when political parties, trade unions, and civic organisations no longer provide convincing stories about collective futures, reactionary movements fill the void with fictions of mythic continuity. Liquid realism must therefore attend not only to the falsity of these narratives but to the genuine needs they address. The question is not simply how to debunk reactionary folklore but how to create alternative narratives capable of acknowledging loss, addressing precarity, and imagining futures without resorting to fantasies of restoration. This is where counter-mythic practices become essential in concept but difficult in practice.

14 Hookland: A Metamodern Counter-Myth

In an age where folklore is increasingly weaponised for political ends, the fictional English county of ‘Hookland’, created by David Southwell, emerges as a profoundly metamodern cultural project. This dynamic aligns with broader contemporary folklore scholarship that examines how memory, tradition, and affect circulate in contemporary culture. For example, Ray Cashman’s work on ‘critical nostalgia’ in Northern Ireland (2006) demonstrates how longing for the past can generate reflective, rather than reactionary cultural practices. Michael Dylan Foster’s analysis of haunted travelogues (2009) similarly shows how spectral narratives narrativise absence. Regina Bendix’s *In Search of Authenticity* (1997) remains foundational in understanding how authenticity is constructed, contested, and mobilised. These contexts help situate Hookland within a wider field of counter-folkloric experimentation, alongside recent analyses such as Jamie Chambers’ ‘Troubling Folk Horror’ (2022) and the discussion of media recursion in *Möbius Media* (2024).

Positioned between sincerity and irony and between myth and critique, Hookland refuses the nostalgic essentialism that characterises nationalist appropriations of folklore. Reactionary movements mobilise mythic pasts and reinvented traditions to create the illusion of historical continuity and purity. Folklore becomes a means of political control by naturalising identity categories and suppressing histories of violence, class subjugation, and colonialism. Hookland refuses both the detached irony of postmodern pastiche and the naive sincerity of traditional myth. In Hookland, ghosts walk through the landscape, but it is never clear whether they are manifestations of the land itself or of historical trauma seeking expression. The uncertainty is not a weakness but the very point. Hookland, however, performs a fundamental inversion of this logic. Where nationalist folklore claims rootedness in an unquestioned past, Hookland foregrounds its own constructedness. It announces self-awareness of myth-making as process rather than product. Rather than pretending to be authentic in the manner of nationalist mythologies, Hookland insists that all folklore is authored, by history, by memory, by trauma, by class, by power – fundamentally by people. Hauntology resonates throughout Hookland’s landscape. Where nationalist folklore uses myth to stabilise identity and deny historical rupture, Hookland embraces the ruins. Its landscapes are filled with abandoned airbases, temporal gateways, extinguished industries, erased communities, and deliberately repressed histories. The county is saturated with the ghosts of cancelled futures, most particularly the post-war social democratic Britain that was dismantled and the industrial working-class communities that were destroyed, the radical possibilities that were crushed.¹⁸

Many Hookland entries rework classic English folklore but twist it through the lens of working-class memory and historical trauma. The folklore of abandoned Cold War bunkers, closed-down factories, and demolished council estates becomes as mythically charged as any medieval legend. Here folklore becomes survival storytelling, a way of processing and transmitting experiences that official histories refuse to acknowledge. For

¹⁸ David Southwell defined his approach as folklore as resistance in his 2019 *Hellebore* article. The ‘democratic’ and decentred nature of Hookland means that a participatory audience have developed his creation on social media and in print ‘fan fiction’, and have expanded the ‘universe’ alongside Southwell’s authorship.

example, Hookland's treatment of landscape marks this subversion. Where certain nationalist appropriations of folklore present the English countryside as timeless and unchanging, a green and pleasant land untouched by history, Hookland's landscape is palimpsestic, layered with contradictory histories. Roman roads intersect with Victorian railways, medieval field systems overlay Bronze Age barrows, and Cold War infrastructure crumbles beside Neolithic monuments. The land itself becomes a text that refuses singular interpretation. In Hookland, multiple pasts coexist without resolution. As Southwell says:

It's the psychogeography of a place that doesn't exist built around the real myth circuits, Albionic shadows and actual places of a 1970s childhood. Stories told in the form of the sort of travel that used to be given away at petrol stations, a cultural artefact from when the TV news carried UFO sightings and ghosts on their nightly bulletins along with reports of IRA bombs.¹⁹

This approach extends to Hookland's treatment of tradition. Where reactionary folklore claims unbroken continuity, Hookland insists on syncretism and contamination. Its stories draw promiscuously from Celtic artefacts, Roman occupation, twentieth-century counterculture, industrial decline, Cold War paranoia, and American pop culture. This folkloric hybridity functions as political critique. By insisting on hybridity and contamination as folklore's constitutive features, Hookland makes it impossible to claim tradition as the exclusive possession of any single community. Hookland also resists the centralisation that characterises nationalist mythology. Instead of a founding myth that explains everything, Hookland has dozens of folklore streams that refuse to resolve into unity. There is no single Hookland story, only proliferating narratives that intersect, contradict, and complicate each other. This structural approach aligns with anti-fascist folk practice. Fascism wants a single origin story whereas Hookland tells a thousand stories that proliferate beyond control. The question of how folklore relates to historical violence becomes central. Reactionary nostalgias attempt to escape history's traumas through fantasy. Hookland does the opposite, it turns directly towards trauma rather than away from it. Where nationalist folklore disavows violence or transforms it into heroic sacrifice, Hookland keeps violence visible as violence. 'Scratch deep enough, though, and there is always conflict, always blood. Beyond the chocolate-box bucolic, village ponds are haunted by the ghosts of witches that refuse to sink.'²⁰

Hookland's counter-folkloric practice can be further understood through a Lacanian lens. Its refusal of a unified pastoral past is a refusal of the fantasy of wholeness and national unity that reactionary myth depends upon. Instead, Hookland is built from fractures and absences. By its very nature it resists a unified and coherent narrative, in fact it foregrounds the impossibility of this and with it goes an idea of a unified cultural identity. It offers a mode of inhabiting and working with lack rather than presenting an explanatory fantasy. Spectrality is therefore a condition which leads to meaning rather than being an obstacle to it.

The project's use of social media platforms further complicates its relationship to authenticity.²¹ Hookland exists primarily as fragments dispersed across Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, Substack and occasional print publications. This fragmentary mode of existence mirrors the fragmented nature of contemporary experience. There is no authoritative Hookland text and no complete archive. The county consciously exists as rumour, social construct, public narrative, and collaborative construction. Followers contribute their own stories, which Southwell sometimes incorporates, blurring the boundary between author and audience. This collaborative dimension is crucial. Where nationalist folklore positions itself as recovered tradition, something discovered rather than invented, Hookland openly invites participation in myth-making. It democratises folklore production, suggesting that anyone can contribute to the ongoing construction of collective meaning. This stands in direct opposition to the authoritarian structure of reactionary mythology, which demands passive reception of narratives handed down from above. Hookland is thus operating directly with folklore as process rather than an illusory fixed narrative.

However, Hookland is not naively celebratory about participation. The project remains alert to how folklore can be weaponised, how stories can serve power and how collective imagination can be captured by reactionary forces. Its self-consciousness about myth-making is also wariness about myth-making – metamodern oscillation

¹⁹ From: <https://strangerwithfriction.blogspot.com/2015/03/hookland-phoenix-guide-to-strange.html>.

²⁰ Southwell, 'Re-enchantment is Resistance', 63.

²¹ This is developed by Sweeney (2020) in the 'folk horror special' edition of *Revenant* journal, edited by Dawn Keetley.

made method and as such Hookland demonstrates what liquid realism looks like in practice. It shows how it is possible to create meaning in conditions of liquidity without resorting to fantasies of solidity. It shows how to mourn without melancholia and how to honour the past without resurrecting it and how to tell stories adequate to a fractured present. It refuses the comfort of resolution while insisting that refusal of comfort need not mean abandonment of care. The project's political implications extend beyond its explicit content. By demonstrating an alternative to nationalist folklore, Hookland opens space for imagining how collective identity might be constructed without recourse to blood and soil. Southwell's conception of 'ghost soil' is a counter to notions of mythic purity. It suggests that tradition can be multiple, unstable, contested, and incomplete, and that folklore need not serve reactionary politics but can become a resource for navigating liquidity with fidelity to loss and openness to transformation. This is not to claim that Hookland resolves the political problems of liquid modernity. It does not offer a manifesto, or even a clear path forward. What it offers instead is a demonstration, a working model of how to dwell in conditions of liquidity without succumbing to either cynical detachment or melancholic restoration.

The challenge is how a project like this breaks out of limited constraints and how it can be promoted in the same way as the 'easy' stories of the far right. The answer may, ironically, be in expansive and complex fantasy. As Žižek suggests, '... desire is not something given in advance, but something that has to be constructed – and it is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject's desire ... through fantasy, we learn how to desire.'²²

15 Realism as Mourning Work

What does it mean to embrace reality as unfinished, as constituted by the very lack that drives both desire and history? Liquid realism begins from this premise: the real is not plenitude to be restored but absence to be negotiated. Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia is important here. Melancholia clings to the lost object, refusing to accept its loss. Mourning works through loss without erasing its memory. Conservative realisms, whether ontological or cultural, might be interpreted as being melancholic in that they could be seen to idealise lost immediacy. Liquid realism is mournful in acknowledging loss as generative.

Fisher's concept of hauntology exemplifies this mournful realism. For Fisher, late-capitalist culture becomes a landscape of 'lost futures'. Yet where Fisher diagnoses cultural melancholy, liquid realism proposes a different response, perhaps one that Fisher was hinting at with his nascent concept of Acid Communism. In liquid modernity, loss is not a singular event but a continuous condition. Hauntology, defined in these terms, offers a way through this impasse. Rather than attempting to mourn completely (which liquid modernity makes impossible) or refusing to mourn at all (which produces melancholic paralysis), hauntological liquid realism maintains relationship with loss as loss. The ghosts of lost futures are neither dismissed as irrelevant nor resurrected as if nothing had changed. In the post-1989 world, socialism haunts capitalism not as viable alternative but as spectre of unrealised possibility. The liquid realist neither abandons this ghost (cynical acceptance of Capitalist Realism, which Fisher himself was moving away from) nor pretends it lives (nostalgic worship of failed states). Instead, they maintain a relationship with the ghost, learning from its failures, preserving its insights, remaining open to new articulations of its core concerns in transformed conditions.

This reframing has implications for critique itself. In the wake of postmodern suspicion, critique has often been reduced to unmasking, exposing ideology, revealing false consciousness. Yet as Sedgwick (2003) and Felski (2015) note, such 'paranoid' reading has exhausted its affective and political efficacy. Liquid realism calls for reparative critique, acknowledging that the real is inassimilable while seeking connection, sense, and care. Reparative critique recognises that people organise their political desires through available narratives, and that these narratives are often all they have to make sense of experiences of abandonment, loss, and precarity. It would trace how legitimate grievances become articulated through reactionary stories, not to excuse those narratives but to create openings for different articulations, and perhaps even alternative fantasies.

²² Žižek. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, 6.

Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism' (2011) helps this analysis. Cruel optimism names the condition of maintaining attachment to objects that actively impede our flourishing but that we cannot abandon. These attachments are cruel because they promise what they cannot deliver, yet we persist in them because abandoning them would mean losing the fantasies that organise our lives. Yet this does not mean we should abandon optimism. Liquid realism recognises the necessity of cruel optimism while working to make it less cruel, to find ways of attaching that acknowledge impermanence and failure while still providing meaning and motivation. What liquid realism adds to Berlant's analysis is an insistence that cruel optimism functions differently depending on its object. Optimism attached to fantasies of restored solidity in the form of stable employment, the resurrection of mythic community, the re-establishment of patriarchal authority, etc. is cruel in ways that optimism attached to projects of care, solidarity, and mutual aid need not be. The latter forms of attachment accept impermanence as condition rather than obstacle. They do not promise restoration but offer ways of living with loss that do not foreclose possibility. This distinction is crucial for understanding how liquid realism might inform political practice. The task is not to eliminate attachment or to abandon hope, but to cultivate forms of attachment and hope adequate to liquid conditions. This means building institutions that accept their own provisional nature, creating solidarities that do not depend on permanence, imagining futures that incorporate rather than deny the losses that have shaped us.

16 Living Liquid Realism

Liquid realism names the critical stance adequate to our moment: a realism that accepts liquidity not as failure but as the condition under which meaning now operates. Where new realisms seek ontological bedrock and postmodernism celebrated dissolution, liquid realism dwells in the flows and resistances of contemporary existence, holding form while remaining in motion. It is realism as mourning work: acknowledging what has been lost without attempting resurrection, maintaining relationship with ghosts rather than denying their death or pretending they still live.

This article has argued that contemporary returns to realism often harbour conservative impulses as longings for metaphysical certainty, attempts to resolidify what liquid modernity has dissolved, efforts to banish ghosts through philosophical assertion or mythic restoration. Against this, liquid realism draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis to recognise the real as structural lack, on Bauman to understand liquefaction as social condition, and on Fisher to grasp hauntology as our temporal predicament. Where metamodernism describes the oscillation between irony and sincerity as aesthetic sensibility, liquid realism transforms that oscillation into method. When grounded in psychoanalytic understanding of desire and sociological awareness of structural conditions, oscillation becomes not paralysis but navigation. The political stakes are urgent. Reactionary movements exploit liquid modernity's anxieties by promising resolidification, as if this were possible. Liquid realism distinguishes this melancholic resurrection from genuine mourning work. Where reactionary nostalgia denies rupture, liquid realism acknowledges loss without fetishising it. Where nationalism freezes folklore into weapon, projects like Hookland demonstrate how myth can remain fluid and critically engaged while providing meaning.

The practical applications of liquid realism extend beyond cultural analysis into the organisation of everyday life. This raises questions. How do we build institutions that can bend without breaking? How do we create commitments that survive the dissolution of the structures that once sustained them? How do we tell stories that acknowledge loss without foreclosing hope? These are not rhetorical questions. They demand answers, and those answers will necessarily be provisional, context-dependent, and subject to revision. Liquid realism does not offer blueprints but instead orientations as suggested ways of attending to issues rather than prescribing outcomes.

What liquid realism offers is less a political programme than an analytical mode of approaching cultural and political objects. Where ideological critique moves directly to unmasking, liquid realism asks what loss is being negotiated. Where sociological analysis maps structural conditions, liquid realism asks how those conditions are narrativised. The consideration of contemporary political rhetoric demonstrates the difference. In terms of popular engagement what looks like cynical manipulation from above and hegemonic participation from below in a purely ideological standpoint reveals itself, through a liquid realist lens, as a genuine response to genuine

disorientation. This is one that demands counter-narratives rather than mere debunking or dialectic opposition. Similarly, the analysis of Hookland shows how cultural production can be evaluated not only for its content but for its relationship to loss. This methodological orientation is transferable. It can be brought to bear on literary texts that negotiate precarity and cancelled futures, on political movements that promise restoration, and on cultural forms that recycle the past without acknowledging why. In each case, liquid realism asks the same questions – what loss is being managed here, by what means, and towards what ends? These are not rhetorical questions. They are analytical ones, and their answers will be specific to the object, provisional in their claims, and open to revision, in keeping with liquid conditions.

Liquid realism offers a way of narrating and inhabiting instability without retreating into nostalgic certainty. It asks how to commit despite impermanence, how to believe while acknowledging fantasy's mediating role, how to maintain orientation without fixed coordinates. This is realism not as doctrine but as a way of inhabiting contradiction without demanding resolution. The real remains unfinished, haunted by cancelled futures and constituted by structural lack. Liquid realism accepts this as permanent condition rather than temporary crisis. It refuses both the fantasy of recovered solidity and the nihilism of pure flux, offering instead an ethics of care adequate to liquidity. This is how we might continue to act in a world where nothing holds its shape for long. This is not by denying liquidity but by learning to move with and against its currents, maintaining fidelity to what matters while accepting that every form we create will eventually dissolve and require remaking.

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