

OFF CAMPUS

THE GHOST OF 2016

Why we're stuck rehearsing the past

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Ten years ago, Donald Trump was preparing for his first inauguration, Pokémon GO united strangers in public parks, and Vine was still alive. Fast forward to 2026, social media is awash with references to 2016: grainy Instagram filters, Tumblr aesthetics, and decade-old pop songs charting again. 2016 feels impossibly distant yet strangely close. To understand this paradox, we need to turn to cultural theorist Mark Fisher, who explains why contemporary culture keeps circling the past instead of moving forward.

Fisher described modern culture as suffering from “hauntological” malaise: a condition wherein we are “haunted” not by the past itself, but by the futures it once promised. In *Ghosts of My Life*, he argued that the 21st century is marked by a “slow cancellation of the future”, a failure of the new to arrive. So, when young people romanticise 2016, they’re not actually yearning for the year itself – they’re mourning a sense of forward momentum that no longer feels available. The “2026 is the new 2016” trend is hauntology in its purest form; we’re not even waiting for enough time to pass before declaring something “retro”.

Consider what 2016 actually represented: political upheaval, rising



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Crucially, nostalgia here does ideological work. It reframes dissatisfaction with the present as longing for the past rather than anger at the systems producing that dissatisfaction. Instead of asking why life feels more constrained, expensive, and surveilled, we retreat into curated memories. Nostalgia soothes without challenging anything. It is, as Fisher might say, perfectly compatible with late-stage capitalism.

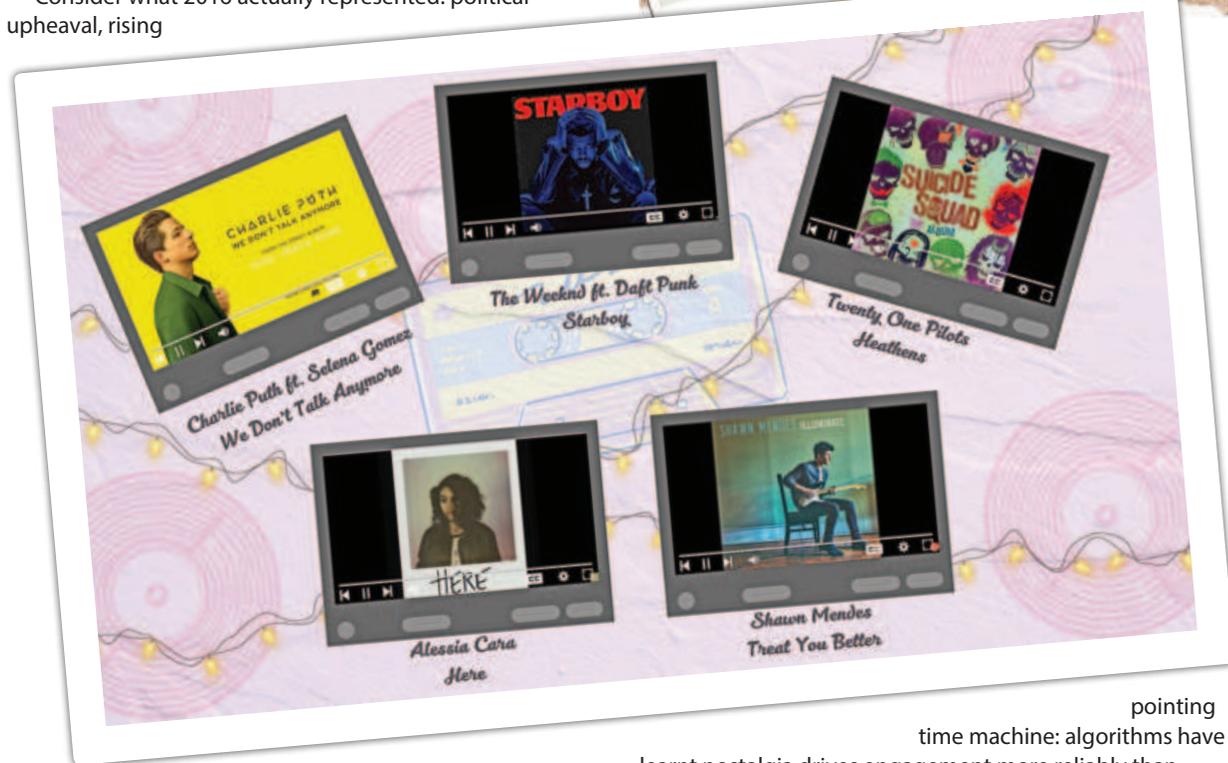
There’s also a subtle cruelty in how this nostalgia circulates. Declaring 2016 the “last good year” (remember when that was 2012?) implies everything since has been a slow decline, that nothing genuinely hopeful can emerge. If the best days are always behind us, why imagine alternatives? This breeds a quiet cynicism, especially among young people already inheriting a world defined by limits. Nostalgia is conservative by nature; it teaches us to look back for solutions to forward-facing problems, reducing the radical energy required to reshape the future to passive consumption of the past.

Fisher argued that breaking free from hauntology required confronting our condition honestly, without the anaesthetic of nostalgia. It meant asking: what would new music, new politics, and new ways of living actually look like? Not as a return to some imagined past glory, but as a radical break with the repetition compulsion that defines our zeitgeist.

The question facing anyone observing the “2026 is the new 2016” trend is whether this nostalgia represents a final surrender to Fisher’s slow cancellation of the future, or whether, paradoxically, it might contain seeds of its own critique. Perhaps in recognising how quickly we flee to the past, we might glimpse how desperately we need to imagine and create something new.

Until then, we remain haunted by our own recent history, ghosts at a party that ended before we noticed, convinced that if we just dress the part, we might bring it back to life.

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authoritarianism, the consolidation of surveillance capitalism through social media, and mounting climate anxiety. Yet retrospectively, it gets packaged as a simpler time – before the pandemic, before whatever fresh crisis currently dominates our feeds. This reveals something crucial: nostalgia isn’t really about the past. It’s about our inability to imagine a different future.

The younger generation’s romanticisation of eras they never experienced or actively participated in is especially poignant, as they’ve inherited a world where being unmoored in time is the default state and cultural recycling is normal. Social media amplifies this exponentially. Online platforms function as archaeological sites of our own lives, serving “memories” from years past, training us toward retrospection over anticipation. Every app is a backwards-

pointing time machine: algorithms have learnt nostalgia drives engagement more reliably than anything else – a predictable hit of dopamine wrapped in the safety of the already-experienced, it’s guaranteed an emotional response.

This is what Fisher warned about: how the past and its promised-but-unrealised futures linger like ghosts. The actual 2016 isn’t being mourned, but the future people believed might follow – where progress felt plausible, crises temporary, and adulthood not synonymous with burnout. That future never arrived, and as a result, even the recent past now functions as a lost utopia. We’re not talking about the 60s or 90s – but about *ten years ago*. The nostalgia cycle has accelerated to the point of absurdity, revealing our crisis isn’t just the future but the present, which has become so thin and unsatisfying that we immediately flee to *any* past for relief.